AN ETHICS OF EMPATHY AND AN AESTHETICS OF ALTERITY:

THE OTHER AND OTHERNESS IN THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

by

S SATISH KUMAR

(Under the Direction of Dorothy M. Figueira)

ABSTRACT

This work seeks to examine the ethical underpinnings of the study of literatures and cultures located otherwise than a Euro-American context, especially in a context of hermeneutic lenses located and defined in the Euro-American Academy. It contextualizes a study of literatures – Comparative Literature as such a discipline or field specifically, within larger questions and debates concurrent within a practice of humanism in the global academy. Using the literary cultures and contexts of Africa, South Asia and their respective diasporas as counterpoints, this work seeks to examine the problems of dialogues between the Global Souths, especially from a location within Western Euro-American epistemologies. With a specific focus on an idea of a "crisis" in academic practices of humanism globally, the analyses and arguments presented here seek to examine the experiential specificities of such crises in locations such as India. Such an exploration into the political exigencies underlying any locational practice of academic humanism, emphasizes the resonances between local and global concerns in the humanities and the forces that increasingly define questions of subjecthood, agency and dignity within the larger human condition today. It is from such an understanding of the relationship between the human condition

and practices in academic humanism that this work moves towards pondering relationality in general, and specifically the conditions, preconditions, and postconditions of relationships between the Self and the Other. Through such considerations, this work further seeks to imagine and posit possible ethical frameworks for encounters and engagements with alterities beyond limiting identitarian frames, in a context of intercultural and transnational literary and cultural research.

INDEX WORDS: African Studies, African American Studies, Alterity, Comparative Literature, Democratic Criticism, Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics, Humanism, Humanities, Intercultural Studies, Judith Butler, Martin Heidegger, Moral Philosophy, Moral Psychology, Otherness, Paul Ricoeur, Rabindranath Tagore, South Asian Studies, Toni Morrison, World Literature.

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DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to the memory of Nabaneeta Dev Sen. She called me her "grand-student," because I had been taught and trained by students she had mentored while she had been professor of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University. She passed away late last year after an exhausting and exacting battle with cancer. Her life as a writer, scholar and teacher is one to aspire towards, as she bought a spirit of curiosity, generosity and unparalleled kindness to each of these endeavors. I learnt as much about Comparative Literature and a practice of humanism from her as I did about life.

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INTRODUCTION

As Paul Ricoeur recognizes in *The Just*, capacity as a function can be "assigned to a person, owing to its intimate connection to the notion of personal or collective identity," and at the heart of the idea of capacity lies, as he states, not only the "ability to do something," but also the ability to assume authorship of one's actions (Ricouer, *The Just* 2-3). Responsibility, as he later elaborates in the work, while it is tied to the "capable" subject's agency, also moves from the individual to the inter-subjective or the interrelational:

> "It is the other *of whom I am in charge* for whom I am responsible. This responsibility no longer comes down to a judgement bearing on the relationship between the author of the action and its effects in the world. It extends to the relation between the agent and the patient (or receiver) of an action. The idea of a person for whom one has responsibility, joined with that of the thing one has under one's control, leads in this way to a quite remarkable broadening that makes the direct object of one's responsibility vulnerable and fragile insofar as it is something handed over to the care of an agent" (28-29).

Ricoeur would go on to argue shortly hereafter that while responsibility towards the "object" of one's action might stem from the capacity for harm in an ability to act, but is tied equally to action as a form of relationality, as we would see for example in Hannah Arendt's definition of action in *The Human Condition* (31). What is proposed here is not just a from of relationality through intersubjective responsibility, but rather also an idea of a participative collectivity. As evidenced by his critique of Arendt's explications of the "Doctrine of the Right," Ricoeur's own reading of such a concept is less absolute, it is as much a moral contract as it is social or political (108). In such a sense the right to have rights is most fundamental, however, the exercise of one's right(s) is then in turn regulated by interactional and intersubjective morality. While his primary critique of Arendt is based on her ideas of a "political philosophy" that emerges out of her own readings

into Kantian cosmopolitanism, Ricoeur's primary intervention in such a re-interrogating of the notions of justice and judgement is the proposing of a middle ground between the universalism inherent within the idea of a cosmopolitanist historiography and reflective judgement as a mode of engagement with history. It is only then that, as he states: "The sole indication of such reconciliation for *critical* philosophy is the exemplarity that gives a point of futurity to communicability and, in this way, a 'prophetic' dimension to reflective judgement" (108).

I have come to realize now that, the question of "reflective" judgement, as Ricoeur defines it, is in many ways foundational to the inquiry I attempt especially in the first part of this work. It is the hopes of arriving at such a "prophetic" dimension, that I begin with an inventory of debates within the humanities, more specifically concurrent questions in practices of the humanities within a context of the larger human condition. The question that this work investigates – the possibilities and impossibilities for a response posed to one by the *face,* then begins in an interrogation of the possibility for understanding a praxis based in what Ricoeur calls "responsibility" and what Emmanuel Levinas defines as "being towards." It is from such a position that I begin with an understanding of Humanism and the humanities as a form of relationality and engagement with the human condition. The particular capacity foundational to such a praxis is the capacity for engagement, and the question then is whether or not a practice of humanism can then in some way be integral to the cultivation or realization of such a capacity. If we are to, for example, as Edward Said suggest, think of humanism as based in democratic criticism and therefore by extension an actional praxis for being in the world through exercises of democratic criticism, then as Ricoeur reminds us, at what cost does the exercise of such a right come?

In the following pages, I reflect in particular on the various events over the past year in India's history and the grave crises the exercises of majoritarian governmental power have posed

in a practice of participatory citizenship and democratic criticism. Quite contrary to a view that understands the capable subject's agency in terms of such a subject's sovereignty, I think of the incontrovertible vulnerability of the acting subject in the face of majoritarian power. I do not wish to go into further specifics, as I do in the second chapter of the first part, and besides an introduction hardly allows the space to adequately engage with the state of the worlds we inhabit. I am not necessarily speaking only of a predisposition towards "anti-intellectualism" that usually accompanies and eventually sustains the exercise of majoritarian power, at least not in theoretical or philosophical terms alone. I reflect, as I write this introduction to my present work, on actual instances of the exercise of such majoritarian power and the justifications usually proffered in defense of it. I am thinking, for example, of Arupjyoti Saikia, a professor of history at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati, who was recently summoned and interrogated by the National Investigation Agency (NIA), an Indian federal agency founded in 2009 for the investigation of terrorist activities.

I agree, therefore, in spirit with the core of Said's inquiry in a work such as *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* – what can an academic practice of humanism mean in a "inhumane" and "genocidal" world? However, I also seek to bring to light the actual human cost of such practices in contexts such as contemporary India – contexts otherwise than the Euro-American academy. For obvious reasons, what concerns me in relation to such contexts is the cost that is paid in the vulnerability that ostensibly accompanies any claim to authorship over one's action. And should one think of humanism, academic or otherwise, as potentially a practice of democratic criticism through forms of participatory citizenship, then is the practice and the practitioner called upon to reflect on such costs? Using the histories of my own field of academic training and practice, Comparative Literature, as an example, both globally and particularly in India, I attempt a

movement towards the recognition of such a cost – the inherent reciprocal recognition of the Self's vulnerability in engagement with another. Such a recognition is fundamentally premised in the foundational principle of Comparative Literature as a practice that operates across cultural and literary locationalities and academic disciplinarities. This seems particularly true in the Indian context, where Comparative Literature initially grew out of questions of decolonization and in resistance to the continuing cultural hegemony exercised colonial knowledge systems in the academy, that would later become a means for the contemplation of the cultural pluralities that constitute an Indian national identity. However, in proposing the study of Comparative Indian Literatures, as we see in the Indian academy starting the late 1970s, are we also called upon to engage with the national qualifier inserted therein? Moreover, what would such an engagement look like in the context of the forces and discourses that are increasingly reconfiguring ideas of nationhood and nationality along majoritarian and absolutist lines?

It is from such questions that the work moves from contemplating humanism and the humanities as a possible praxis that makes apparent a human capacity for engagement through literary and philosophical emplotments of alterity. The second chapter in second part, begins with a brief reading of Rabindranath Tagore's 1916 novella, *Chaturanga*. The reading directly addresses moral questions that underpin both the capacity to act and attempts at acting towards another. Most immediately, the reading of Tagore's work seeks to explore the question raised by contemporary scholars such as Judith Butler vis-à-vis acting in order to save or preserve the life of another. How can one act ethically in preserving the life of another? On whose terms is such a need for saving and the protection then in turn extended defined? Is the Other, who is defined in vulnerability and thereby in need of saving, then saved on their own terms or does their apparent, perceived or constructed lack of agency render such consideration of terms moot? The choices

Butler offers are between action and inaction, i.e. one can act, in which case one's actions have the capacity to either destroy or save the Other, or one can through in action let the Other continue to exist in vulnerability and therefore possibly and eventually cease to exist on account of such circumstances of vulnerability. It is from such contemporary configurations of the Other as subject to and a subject of vulnerability that the study shifts focus to Levinas' view of the Other and the radical irreducibility of alterity.

What such a choice, as Butler proposes, between action and inaction, especially when such capacities or incapacities are directed toward another, does not allow for, is a contemplation of the bases of both the subject's capacity for action and relationality. At this point I turn to Martin Heidegger's meditations on the "task of thinking," because as I state at the end of the my seventh chapter, while it makes for a powerful rhetoric, statements such as "there is no 'I' without a 'you'," extend beyond a mere relationality based in causation. To re-emphasize, as Ricoeur would argue in *Oneself as Another*, identity is itself, linguistically or perhaps even semiotically speaking, an act of communication, and therefore assumes the presence of a signifying or expressing subject addresser, but equally suggests the presence of a connating object addressee. My study turns to Levinas as a means to further unpack what he calls in works such as *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, the very work of identity. While Heidegger's phenomenological approach may provide a means to contemplate the "task of thinking," Levinas' responses to his works facilitates an understanding of the thinking subject's position within such a task and also points to the possibilities of such a locationality as a site for relationality, particularly one wherein the subject can "be towards" another. Beginning with what is foundational to Heidegger's conception of Being and being in the world, which manifests in a resolution in temporality, Levinas interrogates the very ontological bases for such a resolution through which Being can

phenomenologically experience the world. Can the traversing of such an epistemological path, that seemingly and repeatedly doubles back into the interiority of Being truly contemplate exteriority? More importantly, how can beings thusly configured in terms of such total interiority be towards one another and even more significantly towards the Being's Other? Such an issue becomes the predominant theme in Levinas' philosophy as we move from his work in *Totality and Infinity* towards the grounds for ethics and reciprocal responsibility that he establishes in *Otherwise than Being*.

The final chapter of part two, also the concluding chapter of this work, returns to configurations of otherness, but through interrogations of a possible moral responsibility towards an otherness of a different orded. Through our readings of Levinas' and Ricoeur's view of the Other what notionally emerges is the assumption of an essential entityhood that is ascribed to the Other, one that is structurally no different from that of the Self. As Levinas states in *Totality and Infinity*: "But I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus. We are the same and the other" (Levinas, *Totality* 39). Such a foundational understanding of exteriority forms the basis for reciprocity, responsibility and relationality towards the Other in both Levinas' and Ricoeur's idea of a moral philosophy. As one might deduce from the ascribing of the future as the "time of the Other," that Levinas argues, the Other like the Self in Heidegger's phenomenology of Being is defined in its own temporality, and an engagement with the Other is then a supplication for admittance into the Other's temporality. The question that my larger inquiry into the nature and purpose of a practice in the humanities and humanism culminates in, is then what ethical considerations does a *face-to-face* with the Other whose temporality has been disrupted or disallowed necessitate? More significantly, what can one offer to such a deracinated

Other, when one assumes complicity in the disruption or disallowance that in effect robs them of their sovereign temporality?

It is towards the exploration of such questions that I next turn to two works in particular by Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*. The concluding sentences of the former form a frame to the articulation of such an inquiry:

> "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my own town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late" (Morrison, *Bluest* 164).

These concluding sentences, for me, resonate powerfully with the inquiry from Arundhati Roy's novel that we shall encounter in the conclusion of this work: "Where do old birds go to die?" Is it much too late to inquire after the fate of the seeds that the soil refused to nurture? Is it the horror of such deferment that forces one to disremember? Moreover, should one endeavor towards "rememory," as Morrison calls it in *Beloved*, is such a recovery even possible, given the horror of disremembrance compounded by the erasure facilitated through the deferment of "rememory?" As the dedication at the start of *Beloved* both poignantly and powerfully signs, "Sixty-million and more," the estimated number of lives lost in the triangular passages of the Transatlantic Slave Trade – the nameless and faceless pre-ancestors to American slavery. How does one read the signification of an absentee sign that has been rendered bereft of all signifiers?

This is the larger question that Morrison focalizes through her retelling of Margaret Garner's story in *Beloved*. Encountered in the form of a newspaper clipping while compiling *The Black Book*, Morrison invents a life for which we find no testimonial record, but a life that perhaps because of a refusal to bear testimony, becomes as she states in her foreword to the novel, a "cause célèbre" for the Abolitionists. Sethe whose character is inspired by the historical Margaret Garner

lives in the shadow of a moment in her life wherein she had claimed the capacity to act, but her inability to author the act, borrowing from Ricoeur's definition of capacity, continues to define her life until the very end of her narrative in the novel. It is not whether or not taking the life of her child was the right thing to do, when faced with her own and her children's reclamation into enslavement, but rather the question is whether or not it was her right to act? The question Morrison asks, certainly had both a judicial and a moral component to it, given its contextualization within pre-Emancipation America. In such a sense it is a question that is at once locational and universal, however, through her own narrativization Morrison refuses to either address or separate the two components of such an inquiry. Such a refusal which in turn echoes Garner's own refusal to provide testimony for or to her action, perhaps points to an impossibility for a hermeneutics of the deracinated Other, and such an impossibility then, does not suggest the absence of meaning, but rather an impossibility to confront the implications of its possibility.

Towards such an end, my own reading of Morrison's texts comes out of engagements with feminist, postcolonial and deconstructionist readings of *Beloved*. The intervention I propose in working through such possible hermeneutic approaches to the text, is to emphasize the limitations of the hermeneutic lenses that we have at our disposal as readers – a limitation most severely felt when encountering narratives that have as their subject the experiential lives of the deracinated Other, whose mere mention fills us with abjection. The final chapter, "Reading the Signing Other," begins with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's formulations on the unreadability of the "feminine as subaltern" and moves into Satya P. Mohanty's reading of an epistemology for a postcolonial identity through Sethe's narrative in *Beloved*. In my readings of both approaches I try to elucidate how while such approaches can be hermeneutically substantiated, they still fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relations between Sethe's experiential life, her capacity to act

and finally her incapacity to fully author her action. In such a regard, Spivak's idea of the "subaltern" speaking through inscription comes close to articulating the reason for the unreadability of the "feminine as subaltern." The question that my understanding of such an unreadability traces back to is that of the subject's capacity, in this case the reading subject's capacity for engagement with the *otherwise than*. It is in such a culminating question that I tie in what Julia Kristeva has defined as a "crisis of the subject," with ever-emergent notions of a crisis in a practice of the humanities today.

What I ultimately seek to present in this work is perhaps closest to what Ricoeur understood as both a praxis and practice of critical reflection. Hence, the work culminates and concludes in a question: what does one have to offer in response to the ever-present *face* that signs an "unreadable" demand? How does one address, engage, or maybe even confront the Presence, that is always otherwise than extant mythologies and metaphysics of presence? I do argue that one might find in Levinas and Ricoeur a more liberating alternative to reading alterity as absence or trace, but how does one content with the reality of the absented Other, and more importantly one's own complicity in such an Other's absenting. As Butler has argued, and one might agree in this regard, that one's own safety is always relative to another's precarity. One might even go as far as stating that security is always a debt paid in one way or another through vulnerability. Can one even contemplate responses to such questions; is there even room to ponder them within the systematicities and structuralities of the humanities academy today? I do not arrogate claims to prophesy, but what concerns me most in the writing of this work is an idea of futurity. A futurity for practices in the humanities that inherently rely on a relationality with the larger human condition. I do not offer any conclusive answers to the questions that conclude this study, and in all honesty, I find myself wholly incapable of answers. However, such an incapacity for answers

does not stem from a fundamental impossibility for answers. There seem to be only two possibilities, either it is much, much, much too late or that there is, as the passage from Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* quoted in the beginning of the conclusion to this work states, "so much else to look forward to." Either way, the task at hand is the work of "rememory." More specifically for us, as readers, the task at hand is re-reading the dis-read.

PART I

مجھ سے پہلی سی محبت مری محبوب نہ مانگ

میں نے سمجھا تھا کہ تو ہے تو درخشاں ہے حیات

تیرا غم ہے تو غم دہر کا جھگڑا کیا ہے

تیری صورت سے ہے عالم میں بہاروں کو ثبات

تیری آنکھوں کے سوا دنیا میں رکھا کیا ہے

تو جو مل جائے تو تقدیر نگوں ہو جائے

یوں نہ تھا میں نے فقط چاہا تھا یوں ہو جائے

اور بھی دکھ ہیں زمانے میں محبت کے سوا

راحتیں اور بھی ہیں وصل کی راحت کے سوا

ان گنت صدیوں کے تاریک بہیمانہ طلسم

ریشم و اطلس و کمخاب میں بنوائے ہوئے

جا بہ جا بکتے ہوئے کوچہ و بازار میں جسم

خاک میں لتھڑے ہوئے خون میں نہلائے ہوئے

جسم نکلے ہوئے امراض کے تنوروں سے

پیپ بہتی ہوئی گلتے ہوئے ناسوروں سے

لوٹ جاتی ہے ادھر کو بھی نظر کیا کیجے

اب بھی دل کش ہے ترا حسن مگر کیا کیجے

اور بھی دکھ ہیں زمانے میں محبت کے سوا

راحتیں اور بھی ہیں وصل کی راحت کے سوا

مجھ سے پہلی سی محبت مری محبوب نہ مانگ

mujh se pahlī sī mohabbat mirī mahbūb na maañg

maiñ ne samjhā thā ki tū hai to daraḳhshāñ hai hayāt

terā ġham hai to ġham-e-dahr kā jhagḌā kyā hai

terī sūrat se hai aalam meñ bahāroñ ko sabāt

terī āñkhoñ ke sivā duniyā meñ rakkhā kyā hai

tū jo mil jaa.e to taqdīr nigūñ ho jaa.e

yuuñ na thā maiñ ne faqat chāhā thā yuuñ ho jaa.e

aur bhī dukh haiñ zamāne meñ mohabbat ke sivā

rāhateñ aur bhī haiñ vasl kī rāhat ke sivā

an-ginat sadiyoñ ke tārīk bahīmāna tilism

resham o atlas o kamḳhāb meñ bunvā.e hue

jā-ba-jā bikte hue kūcha-o-bāzār meñ jism

ḳhaak meñ luThḌe hue ḳhuun meñ nahlā.e hue

jism nikle hue amrāz ke tannūroñ se

piip bahtī huī galte hue nāsūroñ se

lauT jaatī hai udhar ko bhī nazar kyā kiije

ab bhī dilkash hai tirā husn magar kyā kiije

aur bhī dukh haiñ zamāne meñ mohabbat ke sivā

rāhateñ aur bhī haiñ vasl kī rāhat ke sivā

mujh se pahlī sī mohabbat mirī mahbūb na maañg

-Faiz Ahmad Faiz

Ask not of me, my love, for that love of days gone by.
I believed, in your presence life would always be resplendent,
The sorrows of the world, paled in comparison to your slightest grief,
The beauty of your face lends permanence to even the most ephemeral spring,
Is there anything worthier of praise in this world, than your two eyes?
With you by my side prostrates itself before me.
If only all this could be true by my merely desiring it to be.
For there are many griefs in the world besides the pangs of love,
And comforts to be taken, other than in joys of a love reciprocated.

Enchantments dark and ruthless countless centuries old,
Woven in tapestries of silk, satin and brocade.
Bodies bought and sold in markets at every lane and street-corner,
Bathed in blood, caked in ashes and dirt.

Bodies emerging febrile from diseased kilns,
Pus oozing from long festering wounds,
And there too my gaze lingering returns, what do I do?
And enduring yet are the charms of your beauty, what do I do?

For there are griefs in this world other than the pangs of love,
And comforts to be had in joys besides a reciprocated love,
Ask not of me, my love, for that love of days of gone by.[1]
(Translation, mine)

[1] https://www.rekhta.org/nazms/mujh-se-pahlii-sii-mohabbat-mirii-mahbuub-na-maang-mujh-se-pahlii-sii-mohabbat-mirii-mahbuub-na-maang-faiz-ahmad-faiz-nazms

CHAPTER 1

Towards Loving Differently

The text quoted and translated above, is arguably one of the most famous poems by the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz. Faiz was an eminent member of a literary movement spearheaded by a collective called the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) in pre-independence British India. The PWA held its first official congress in 1936 in the city of Lucknow with an inaugural address delivered by the famous Hindi-Urdu writer Munshi Premchand, while its second congress in Calcutta was inaugurated by India's then only literary Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (Sahni 181). Bhisham Sahni, a Hindi writer, playwright and actor, who served as the General Secretary of the organization between 1975 and 1985, contextualizes the rise of the PWA within larger and ongoing nationalist anti-imperialist struggles for independence during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in colonial India (178-179). Central to the organization's aims, he recounts, were the redefining of a "social orientation" for literature in general and the delineating of a precise role played by literary artists within a more universal history of human struggles for freedom and dignity (180). In the immediate context of the ongoing anti-imperialist movement against British colonial rule, the PWA quite simply, in its own unique way, sought to weaponize literature, culture and the arts as mediums for socio-cultural critique and as vehicles of anti-imperialist resistance.

Read against such a historical context, the above-cited poem by Faiz, seems to emerge from an apparent dialectic between "culture and barbarism" as detailed by Theodor Adorno in "Cultural Criticism and Society" – source to the most famously misquoted line from Adorno's oeuvre (as

translated by Samuel and Sherry Webber), "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno, *Prisms* 34). Most people who tout this particular statement or a variation thereof, firstly seem to omit the sentences (not to mention the entirety of the essay itself) immediately preceding such a pronouncement, and secondly, as Anthony Rowland argues, most reiterations of Adorno's pronouncement in the English language ignore, mostly on account of linguistic ineptitude he argues, the subtle nuances of the philosopher's German prose (Rowland 57).

> "Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben" (Adorno, *Prismen* 31).

While I can agree entirely with Rowland's position on the misreading of Adorno's intent, I do believe he judges somebody like George Steiner a bit too harshly. He suggests that Steiner misreads Adorno's statement as entreating a cessation or at least a caesura in poetic activity after the Holocaust/*Shoah*, a reading that Rowland finds common within his critiques of scholars such as Alvin Rosenfeld, Jon Harris and James Young (Rowland 57-58). Firstly, Rowland states that Steiner misinterprets the English translation, which in itself would be an error, because there is no cause to assume that Steiner would not have read Adorno in German – one of the three languages in which Steiner was raised. Secondly, in "Silence and the Poet," Steiner contextualizes Adorno's statement within a larger conversation regarding the place of silence within discourse. Silence, he argues expanding on positions articulated by thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, is a form of "meaningful speech" (Steiner, "Silence" 53). One might suggest that Steiner is negotiating a discursive binary of his own, that though seemingly related to binaries of culture and barbarism, follows its own unique dialectic – a dialectic of articulation and silence. He clearly states that he is not "saying that writers should stop writing" (53). His concerns are regarding the, "proliferation of verbiage in humanistic scholarship," that forcefully undermines the value of silence as

meaningful speech (53). While one could make silence bear meaning, but as Steiner warns us, such a meaning cannot be configured in terms of articulation (54). However, while it might be better, as he suggests, "for the poet to mutilate his own tongue than to dignify the inhuman either with his gift or his uncaring," poets also often task themselves with the overcoming of speechlessness, and such an overcoming often stems from a self-reflexivity experienced in silence (54). Silence is meaningful precisely because it is a "signature of humanity," humanity that is stunned into speechlessness in the face of the inhumane. While such speechlessness is powerful, for "nothing speaks louder than the unwritten poem," but silence is often all too terrifying, for we find comfort in the perpetuation of the word (54).

The speechlessness of the glass display cases in museums at Auschwitz is overwhelming, as Julia Kristeva would later observe in *The Powers of Horror*, because one cannot find meaningful referents in speech for such a visual signifier. For example, there is no discourse that can capture the horror of display case after display case filled with shoes, suitcases, hats, coats, prosthetic limbs, hair etc. They fill us with a sense of what Kristeva would define as "abjection" – a concept we shall return to for a fuller exploration later on in this work. The horror of such encounters is a reckoning with the impossibility for narrative. It is not that such images, that wield what Kristeva would call the "powers of horror," do not possess meaning, neither is such a meaning ineffable in the strictest sense of the word. There is meaning there, in the remnants of a humanity that was denied even the barest dignity in the most violent ways possible, not quite articulable, but meaningful nonetheless. It is not inarticulable, because one simultaneously has and does not have knowledge of it. Quite contrarily, it resists articulation, precisely because it is commonly known. It is not ineffable in a mystical sense, and therefore, should the poet find language to overcome the speechlessness brought on by an encounter with the horrifyingly inhumane, it is not a mystical

articulation of the ineffable. It is rather, no more than an expression of the horror encountered in the face of the inhumane. It is the finding of speech despite the fear and trembling that the inhumane engenders. It is the overcoming of speechlessness, not the overcoming of horror. The inhumane, as Steiner argues, should horrify us – it should stun us into silence, for to not be horrified would imply an indifference more horrifying than the object of horror itself. Therefore, unlike the author of a narrative, the poet is not called upon to make meaning intelligible or called upon to provide a causal progression or articulate the possibility of meaning outside of a linear temporal progression. Poets have the advantage of speaking their speechlessness. Therefore, as Steiner's later reflections on the unspeakability of the inhumane would suggest, it is such a capacity for overcoming speechlessness through articulation that makes the poetry of Paul Célan so very exceptional. "Only silence can aspire to the lost dignity of meaning. The silence of those no longer capable of speech, the so-called *Muselmänner*[2] in the concentration camp," Steiner states (Steiner, *The Poetry* 197). In this sense, poetry or poetic expression is neither a quest for meaning nor relevance. Such poetry does not need to claim relevance or offer healing to a traumatized humanity. However, in the absence of such expression, one seeks relevance in that which is articulable, one turns away from contemplation to action – actions to counteract encounters with inhumanity, but more specifically the inhumane.

Faiz's poem, could then be read as an expression of such a move towards action, in keeping with the spirit of the literary movement he helped galvanize. In a rather interesting turn, he is not asking what poetry can do, instead he addresses what poetry was in the process of becoming

[2] The word was initially a somewhat crude way of referring to captives of World War II Nazi concentration camps, who through severe starvation and exhaustion became resigned to eventually dying in the concentration camps. A defining feature of the *Muselmänner* (sing. *Muselmann*) was an apathetic listlessness regarding their fate. In Steiner's work, they become emblematic of the complete destruction of the human siprit through the psychological machinery of the Nazi concentration camps.

incapable of doing. He is of course speaking to conventions of the traditional love lyric within Urdu poetry. The poetic persona and the poet, one might argue, echo the same sentiment. At the height of the anti-imperialist struggle, as a poet writing in the Urdu language, he expresses what one might deem a crisis in practice. The crisis in question is equally a quest for relevance. It responds to the question – how could one write poetry in times such as these? While the persona addresses the beloved, the poet, one could argue, is addressing his craft, or more specifically the "horizon of expectations," to borrow Hans Robert Jauss' term, that defines the writing of poetry within his literary and extra-literary context. When faced with the horrors of the world – bodies being bought and sold at street corners, long festering wounds, the betrayals of history, etc., the lover can no longer allow himself to be wholly consumed by the beauty of his beloved. He cannot offer them as he says, "that love of days gone by." If we read the poet into the persona he crafts for the poem, we could see a similar address being made to poetry, which is itself, as Roland Barthes would say, *A Lover's Discourse*. Such an address, that is also the poet's entreatment to his own craft – no doubt a labor of love, begins with taking stock of a traditional poetic lexicon within which he operates. Opening with the poetic refrain, "Ask not of me, my love, for that love of days gone by," the poet reflects on what such a love used to be, but then comes to the realization that "there are griefs far greater in the world" than unreciprocated love. Such a position is in no way unique or unprecedented. The idea of sublimating one's private loves, desires, hopes and aspirations for a "collective good" is, perhaps, as old as the mythologies that constitute human collectivities. As Gwendolyn Brooks writes, "My dreams, my works, must wait till after hell." Written in 1963, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the poem indicates an imminent confrontation of the bitterest kind. Martin Luther King Jr had been incarcerated in Birmingham, Alabama earlier that year, and had issued his famous letter addressed

to a group of eight white clergymen in Birmingham who had issued a, "Call for Unity," against protests and demonstrations incited by "outsiders" within their state. He responded by renewing a call for "direct action" and continued nonviolent struggle, explaining to his "fellow clergymen" that such action needed to be immediate, because, "Oppressed people cannot stay oppressed forever." In response to such a call to action, Brooks writes:

> I hold my honey and I store my bread
> In little jars and cabinets of my will.
> I label clearly, and each latch and lid
> I bid, Be firm till I return from hell.
> I am very hungry. I am incomplete.
> And none can tell when I may dine again.
> No man can give me any word but Wait,
> The puny light. I keep eyes pointed in;
> Hoping that, when the devil days of my hurt
> Drag out to their last dregs and I resume
> On such legs as are left me, in such heart
> As I can manage, remember to go home,
> My taste will not have turned insensitive
> To honey and bread old purity could love.[3]

The poem opens with images of an almost pristine domestic warmth and joy that must be locked away. It is evocative of the comforts and simple pleasures of homeliness. The smell of freshly baked bread, sliced while it is still warm, drizzled with honey, enjoyed at a table polished by years of use, perhaps in the waning warmth of a winter afternoon's sunlight. This simplest of such joys must be locked up in cabinets that are willed to remain shut, until one has returned home after

[3] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43315/my-dreams-my-works-must-wait-till-after-hell

confronting Hell. However, the poet also gives voice to the hope that such an encounter with Hell, would not have obscured the simple joys and comforts of home.

While expressing a similar sentiment, Faiz's poem seems to further problematize the possibility of a return, after the fact, to a prelapsarian antebellum past. This poem has been, no doubt, interpreted in many ways, the most common of which tend to focus on the fundamental incompatibilities of war and love. However, quite akin to the hope expressed in the closing lines of Brooks' poem, there is a critical difference in Faiz's treatment of the thematics of love and war. As we see in the shifting gaze of the poetic persona in the poem, even after witnessing the carnage of war and the sufferings of an oppressed and tortured peoples, he cannot but turn and look at the radiance of his beloved's face. In such a return, the poetic voice expresses a genuine struggle. The concern for the good of a collective, is not interchangeable for the love towards a beloved. Encountering the inhumane is no doubt forceful and overwhelming, but it does not obscure the tenderness of love or the pain of an unreciprocated love. He does not belittle or undermine the sovereignty of an interpersonal love, he merely expresses that there are griefs in the world other than the pangs of love. He does not, however, present a quantification of pain or suffering. While he does imply that, an interpersonal love, cannot be his only preoccupation, and by extension that of the Urdu lyric, he is also not foreclosing the possibility for such a love. The enduring nature of such a love is expressed in the almost helpless exclamation: "And there too my gaze lingering returns, what do I do? And enduring yet are the charms of your beauty, what do I do?" He can neither give entirely into the exclusively vanguardist demands of a "progressive" poetic aesthetic, nor can he break completely with the poetic tradition that has molded and formed him. He cannot deny love, however, he cannot continue to love as though the privations of a war-torn world do not impact him in any way. He does not, however, suggest or insinuate an incapacity or even

diminished capacity for love. In proposing neither a complete denial nor a sublimation, the poet offers a third possibility in the poem's refrain: "Ask not of me for that love of days gone by." He neither forecloses the possibility of love, neither does he speak of sublimation. He does not say to his beloved, "ask not for love," but rather, "ask not for that love of days of old." He does not seem to be denying the possibility of love, and therefore by extension of poetry, but rather trying to understand what it could mean to love in times of strife. Faiz is not expressing the impossibility, frivolity or futility of love, but rather a possibility for loving differently.

As humanists today, we find ourselves in a similar predicament. While such a predicament, particularly wherein one is expected to justify, so to speak, one's *raison d'être*, is in no way new for practitioners within fields of humanistic scholarship, a sense of crisis within practices of the humanities and what Edward Said terms "democratic criticism," seems to have acquired an unprecedented sense of urgency in the past decade alone. Once again, this is not to say that one has not encountered some iteration of such crises before, one might however argue that the degrees of scrutiny have either intensified or at the very least such lines of inquiry regarding the nature and practice of the humanities have become more apparent in this new millennium. Also, important to acknowledge, is the fact that the visibility of such crises have become increasingly global, particularly with ever expanding channels and networks of global connectivitites. One is increasingly confronted with questions of relevance in often unprecedented ways. One is confronted, with equally increasing urgency, by the ethical bearings of scholarly practices within the humanities. The expectation that one is called upon to both reflect on and address questions of justice, whether they pertain to one's own position in world both within and beyond the academy, or to those of others vis-à-vis our own, is becoming increasingly commonplace in interrogations of academic discourses. Similarly, questions of alterity and an ethics of engaging otherness have

become particularly generative discursive sites for scholarship. Therefore, one continues to grapple with the moral responsibility of "being in the world."

With such rising demands for moral contemplation, both as a crisis within the humanities academy and an interrogation from without, one is left with the following questions. Is the academy a fitting arena for the playing out of such moral contestations? If so, is one to surmise that the academy as an ideational space has failed in addressing the ethical demands of "being in the world?" Lastly, and more importantly, how does one respond to demands for such an actional ethical framework for one's scholastic endeavorings. Such inquiries, one might argue, stem from within a scholastic praxis of the academy itself. External interrogations are often less forgiving.

One perhaps sees less of such open animosity towards the academy in American public discourses, however, I do not wish to go into a long-drawn-out causal history of anti-intellectualism in America. The idea of academic spaces, at least in my experiences during my time as a student at an Indian public university, was somewhat different from the environment I encountered as a graduate student in the United States. At the risk of sounding like a mawkish nostalgic retired radical revolutionary, in my undergraduate days a protest every other day was a commonplace occurrence – students marching against oppressive government policies or picketing the controller of examinations' office demanding changes in the final exam schedule was nothing out of the ordinary. I am by no means bemoaning a "lack of excitement" on American university campuses, I am merely speaking to and from one of many ways in which practices of democratic criticism manifest from within the academy. I grew up in a time when people still spoke of Paris 1968 meaningfully. Hence the idea of protesting something that was, logically speaking, beyond one's powers to change, never seemed absurd. If nothing else one had made a difference by the mere act of registering one's dissent. Before my tone betrays any more jaded sarcasm than it

already has, I would like to try and address what is really at stake here – a practice of democratic criticism and its relation to a possible praxis of humanism. I will address the ways in which Said perceives such a relationality in passages to follow. For now, I will attempt to shed some light on the responses such practices of democratic criticism have garnered in the extreme.

Without getting into very many details, I would like to briefly reflect on the events surrounding a series of student protests at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India in early 2016. On February 9th, 2016 a group of students, mostly from humanities and social sciences programs, held a protest against capital punishment on the university's campus. The protest specifically addressed the sentencing of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri separatist leader, who was convicted for his role in the terror attacks on the Indian Parliament in 2001. The protests soon devolved from the issue of capital punishment to the long-standing issue of militarized government control in the northern Indian frontier state of Jammu and Kashmir. The protests elicited an immediate response from nationalist student groups within the campus and the university authorities rescinded permission for the protest shortly before it was scheduled to take place. Demonstrations were carried out regardless of the rescinding of permission and matters only got worse when a video of a small group of protestors shouting "anti-national" slogans "went viral" on the internet, shortly after the protest. We are still, however, within the realm of standard proceedings until this point. The protest and the protesters were denounced by the then Home Minister of India, Rajnath Singh and the Minister for Human Resources Development, Smriti Irani, shortly thereafter. The matter only really exploded when warrants for arrest were issued in the names of the JNU Students' Union president and two other students on charges of sedition and criminal conspiracy. Here is where we deviate from the course of standard operations, and the rest of 2016 saw protests across university campuses all over India and debates across public forums

on the nature and limitations of the right to free speech, the right to freedom of democratic dissent and protest, and state ordered police interventions on university and college campuses.

It is not the events that interest me, as much as the responses they garnered from more "conservative" factions within public discourse. I am not interested in taking sides, neither am I interested in condemnation or praise. Like several others, working from within the global humanities academy, I too was taken aback by the severity of the situation – violence on a university campus between mutually hostile and ideologically motivated student groups, combined with the growing instances of state and police interventions in campus affairs. What troubled me most, and I am sure several of my compatriots within the global academy felt the same, were the excoriating attacks on academic and intellectual practices. I will not dignify such verbal (and in extreme cases physical) assaults by associating names with them, but I remember one in particular that was repeated only too often, which described humanistic scholarship as being parasitic. The students charged with sedition were painted as parasitic ingrates, criticizing the very same state and central governments that fund their institutions and pay their stipends, spitting in the very plates from which they ate. More importantly, what did they have to show for all the resources invested in their education? Were they curing cancer, AIDS, poverty, world hunger? No, of course not! Instead they were expressing compassion for enemies of the state and fanning flames of civil unrest and discord. Such criticism of the event in question soon devolved into claims of general redundancy against the humanities and the social sciences as a whole. Such denunciations, I would argue, grow out of and feed back into a larger milieu of crisis and collapse in understanding the purpose of the humanities and its relation to practices of democratic criticism.

It might seem hyperbolic, but such a crisis in democratic criticism that I am attempting to address here is as real as it is urgent, and in some contexts, it is a question of life and death. What

I am about to detail here and later on this chapter, are not a performance of my oppressed "third-world" alterity, I only seek to provide the unfamiliar reader with a clearer context for my own locational understanding of democratic criticism and a practice of the humanities – a contextualization that might help explain the sense of urgency in my tone. The litany is endless in my own context alone, so as one might imagine, thinking of such horrors on a global scale is all too terrifying. I will cite three instances from the recent past. All three were instances of assassinations, incidentally one from each of the three major countries comprising the Subcontinent. On April 24th 2015, Sabeen Mahmood, a human rights activist and social worker based in Karachi, Pakistan, was shot at and killed by assassins on motorcycles at a red light. Mahmood was returning home after having hosted an event at The Second Floor, a community space and café she had founded in 2007 that also served as an operations center for her non-profit organization Peace Niche. The event she had hosted that night had been a debate on the ongoing military conflict in Balochistan, between Balochistani nationalist groups and the governments of Iran and Pakistan. The conflict has been ongoing since 1948, and needless to say has periodically been a hot-button issue in both global and South Asian international relations and politics. Mahmood had been warned against hosting the event and had received threatening messages from named and unnamed factions alike. Despite all contrary advice and intimidation, Mahmood decided to proceed with the event and was shot to death by assassins carrying 9mm guns while driving back home with her mother later that very night. The second instance, April 25th 2016, Xulhaz Mannan, the founder of the first ever LGBTQI magazine in Bangladesh, was hacked to pieces along with a fellow activist, by a group of men carrying machetes, who entered his apartment in Dhaka impersonating a delivery service. Earlier that month, Mannan had received a barrage of death-threats for having tried to organize a "rainbow rally" in Dhaka, as a means to

draw attention to and protest violence against LGBTQI youth in the country. Shortly before his brutal murder, Mannan had come out in social media as a gay man. Two days prior to his killing a university professor at Rajshahi University in north-eastern Bangladesh had been murdered in a similar manner on suspicions of being an atheist. The third event I reference, is the assassination of Indian journalist and activist Gauri Lankesh. On September 5th 2017, Lankesh who had received the Anna Politkovskaya Award earlier that year, was shot at pointblank range by three assailants outside her home in Bangalore. Lankesh had been a globally recognized journalist reporting on human rights violations, focusing particularly on women's rights and issues. She had also been a strong critic of right-wing Hindu fundamentalist factions in India. Lankesh had used her platform as a journalist to voice her criticisms of government policies and was a strong advocate for the freedom of the press. In 2016, a case of defamation had been filed against her by two leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the state of Karnataka, in response to an article Lankesh had written. The BJP has been a political party with known links to right-wing Hindu fundamentalist ideologies and has been the ruling political party in the Indian government since 2014, reelected for a second term in 2019. The immediate cause for her assassination remains undetermined, however, speculations suggest that those responsible for her murder belonged to Hindu fundamentalist "fringe groups," and that she was targeted for her criticisms of the BJP. Her friendship with professor M.M. Kalburgi, an academic and writer at the Karnatak University, who had been similarly assassinated on August 30th, 2015, shortly after having publicly spoken out in criticism of Hindu superstitious practices and the caste system, only further exacerbated such speculations. Lankesh's murder has continued to garner outrage and horror from the Indian press community since and has become part of the larger conversation surrounding the freedom of the press and the right to freedom of expression, opinion and dissent.

The instances I have referenced, no doubt, indicate a failure in the capacities of engagement with democratic criticism in the most extreme, however, do they also point to a failure within the systems and structures usually tasked with the cultivation of such a capacity? Especially in contemplating the proposed relationality between practices of humanism, the academic practice of humanistic scholarship and democratic processes in general, are we as humanists called upon to rethink our roles as scholars and teachers in the academy and beyond, when confronted with what can only be described as the most brutal silencing of dissent. Added to such a crisis in praxis, what could it mean to practice democratic criticism when doing so is effectively tantamount to inviting immediate harm to one's person and life? Is the martyrdom even worth it? As a member of the Indian parliament had remarked, alongside expressing grief over Lankesh's untimely demise, that she would have still been alive had she chosen not to write what she wrote. Logically speaking one cannot disagree. The same could be said of the deaths of Mahmood and Mannan. Had Mahmood heeded caution and not hosted a conversation on the Balochistan crisis in her café or had Mannan not come out as gay on social media, they would have both been alive today. While we may not be able to altogether refute the bulletproof logic of such lines of argument, we also feel a sense of discomfort in tacitly making our peace with them. It leaves a gnawing feeling in the very core of our beings. Even if we disagree with an opinion, we normally do not immediately jump to complete obliteration, at least if we believe in the veracities of democratic values and processes.

Conversely, how can one continue to put faith in such values and processes in the face of potential mortal danger and flagrant violations of the very contracts that define the collectivities we inhabit. I am reminded of a poem by Rabindranath Tagore that most of us who went through school systems in India were at some point compelled to learn and recite from memory:

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake" (Gitanjali 35).

We were not ever told then, that such a freedom could at times come at the direst costs. How can we as educators in the humanities continue to preach such a gospel, when evidence points to the fact that even within a democratic structure one can in effect only hold one's head high if one is in alignment with or assimilates into the dominant, and difference or dissenting means to exist in the constant shadow of fear? How can one espouse freedom if it is always at the cost of the confinement or circumscription of another? Is it still serviceable to espouse faith in humanity and humanism? More importantly, how does one find language with which to express such a faith?

And yet, quite like the persona in Faiz's poem, our glance lingeringly wanders from the horrors of the world back to poetry, to literature, to art: to possibilities for beauty. As Faiz would himself later go on to demonstrate through his practice of poetry, the answer lay in neither completely abandoning the tradition of the Urdu love lyric that formed him, nor did the demands of moral vanguardism mean that the poet ought turn into a sloganeer.

ہم کہ ٹھہرے اجنبی اتنی مداراتوں کے بعد
پھر بنیں گے آشنا کتنی ملاقاتوں کے بعد
کب نظر میں آئے گی بے داغ سبزے کی بہار
خون کے دھبے دھلیں گے کتنی برساتوں کے بعد

تھے بہت بے درد لمحے ختم درد عشق کے
تھیں بہت بے مہر صبحیں مہرباں راتوں کے بعد
دل تو چاہا پر شکست دل نے مہلت ہی نہ دی
کچھ گلے شکوے بھی کر لیتے مناجاتوں کے بعد
ان سے جو کہنے گئے تھے فیضؔ جاں صدقہ کیے
ان کہی ہی رہ گئی وہ بات سب باتوں کے بعد

(ham ki Thahre ajnabī itnī mudārātoñ ke ba.ad
phir baneñge āshnā kitnī mulāqātoñ ke ba.ad
kab nazar meñ aa.egī be-dāġh sabze kī bahār
ḳhuun ke dhabbe dhuleñge kitnī barsātoñ ke ba.ad
the bahut bedard lamhe ḳhatm-e-dard-e-ishq ke
thiiñ bahut be-mehr sub.heñ mehrbāñ rātoñ ke ba.ad
dil to chāhā par shikast-e-dil ne mohlat hī na dī
kuchh gile shikve bhī kar lete munājātoñ ke ba.ad
un se jo kahne ga.e the 'faiz' jaañ sadqe kiye
an-kahī hī rah ga.ī vo baat sab bātoñ ke ba.ad)

“We still remain strangers despite the exchange of many hospitalities.
How many meetings more shall it be before we become acquainted?
When shall we behold the spotless verdant blossoming of spring?
How many monsoons before the blood-splatter is finally washed away?
Exceedingly merciless were the final moments of our separation.
Unforgiving were the mornings after the passing of the comforting night.
The heart did desire but its undoing did not afford us the leisure.
Else some lamentations and reproaches may have been offered after our prayers.
That which Faiz had endeavored to tell them with all his heart.
That very thing remained unsaid after all else had been said” (Translation, mine).[4]

[4] https://www.rekhta.org/nazms/dhaaka-se-vaapsii-par-faiz-ahmad-faiz-nazms

The poem was titled "Upon Returning from Dhaka." Faiz is said to have written it following his visit to Dhaka in 1974, three years after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Prior to its formation Bangladesh had been East Pakistan, a province of Pakistan separated by the vast expanse of Indian territory in between. The poem uses the imagery and aesthetic common to the Urdu love lyric but does so as a means to addressing the fraught relationship between the two countries. The history of the ultimate separation between the two countries, as we know, goes back to their formation in the partition of the Subcontinent in 1947, per the Indian Independence Act drawn up between Lord Mountbatten, the Indian National Congress led by Jawaharlal Nehru, the Muslim League led by Mohammad Ali Jinnah, and representatives of the Sikh community led by Baldev Singh. The act agreed upon the division of West Punjab and East Bengal, both Muslim majority provinces, from the Indian subcontinent to form the Dominion of Pakistan. In 1955, the Pakistan National Assembly passed a bill to consolidate rule across Pakistan and East Bengal, renaming East Bengal, East Pakistan. Faiz had been a frequent visitor to East Pakistan, and though not quite as vocal about a clear stance on the secessionist movements periodically erupting in the eastern province, he had always supported peace and cooperation between the two regions. There had been several contentious divides that would ultimately take the form of rebellion and bloody military conflicts culminating in the formation of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in 1971.

Faiz visits the city of Dhaka, that had once been the seat of Pakistan's federal government and was now the capital of the newly formed nation of Bangladesh, three years after the violence of the Liberation War. The poem he wrote upon return is a reflection on the long history of tensions between the two regions. He laments over the fact that despite having once been a unified nation, as he now realized, the two Pakistans had always remained separate from one another – quite literally speaking as neither had learnt the other's language. The imposition of Urdu in East

Pakistan, which had been culturally and linguistically predominantly Bengali, was one of the contributive factors to the Bangladesh Liberation War. So, while the idiom Faiz chooses to write his poem in is that of a common trope in the Urdu love lyric – a difficult love followed by a tragic separation, he imbues it with echoes of his visit to the now independent Bangladesh. The last verse in particular conveys his sentiments as a poet, artist and a *de facto* representative of a former unified Pakistan. He never reveals what it is that he went with the intention of having said, he only alludes to the fact that it could not be said. The general idiom of a tragic ill-fated love that was not meant to be, perhaps, holds the answer. One might, for example, think of a straightforward postcolonial reading of the situation. The two disparate nationalities were yoked together by the lines drawn as a final parting colonial assault. We might surmise that the practicality of a uniform nationhood, especially when the two geopolitical entities in question were separated by two thousand odd kilometers in between, was an enterprise doomed for failure from the very outset. Added to the physical separation, there were separations of language, culture and differences even in understandings of religion and religious faith – the very category foundational to their existence. However, the somewhat cryptic nature of Faiz's address in the poem points to issues more complex than a mere allocation of blame. Quite akin to the forced and uncomfortable love that he describes in the poem, neither party is capable of admitting blame, and hence that which must be said remains unsaid. The heart would want to extend compassion, apologies and condolences, but historical circumstances become its very undoing, and therefore there is no space for regrets or lamentations, 'after the offering of prayers'. While, neither Faiz, nor the poetic voice in the poem can say that which must be said, however, they do at least succeed in articulating their failure to speak.

Stating the unspeakablility of the unspeakable, if we recall Steiner's arguments, one might suggest, is the only productive or generative way to begin addressing the horrors of an encounter

with the inhumane. As stated previously, the predicament we as humanists inhabit in the worlds within which we endeavor, can be thought of as paralleling those articulated in the poems by Faiz and Brooks. Therefore, part of what I earlier described as the increasing awareness of a moral responsibility within our practices and praxes of scholarship, and I can only speak to such a predicament from my own training in literary studies, lies in attempting a response to a question that begins with: "How can you…?" or "How can you justify…?" In my own experiences with an interfacing between a sense of being in the academy and that of being in the world, this question has been directly related to the subject of my scholarship. How can one speak of humanism, when there are infants lying in detention camps uncared for in their own filth, separated from their parents as instruments for the enforcement of penalty? Can one speak of justice and its procedure, when there exist precedents of indefinite detention without trial? Is poetry possible really after any of the great human tragedies in our histories? I must confess, I have no answer to such questions. Nothing would make me happier or give me more peace of mind than being able to say something… anything, that draws a direct and positive causal link between our scholastic endeavors and the building of a world wherein infants would not be instrumentalized for the exacting of penalty. I sadly cannot. Even if I were to argue that had we as a culture, society, collective, paid more attention to a study of the humanities, we would not be where we are today as a peoples. Even such a claim does not remedy the situation at hand. Even if we were to admit to the failures of humanity being the failures of the humanities, which is one of the many ways in which the aforementioned line of questioning could be interpreted, we would still be a far way off from redressal, reappraisal or reparation.

Here we return to my initial inquiry regarding the present state of crisis within the humanities globally, much of which will be reflected in my later discussions of Said's *Humanism*

and Democratic Criticism. However, before moving on to a broader discussion on the state of the Humanities and the particular place of Comparative Literature within such a larger sense of anxieties, before we can begin to address the questions of whether or not humanism is still a serviceable term, or whether it is possible to think of a universally useable practice for the humanities, I would like to ask whether or not serviceability and usability are at all what is really at stake. Are we, as humanists, really asking whether or not what we do is worthwhile? Are such contemplations, whether motivated internally or in response to interrogations from without, a manifestation of self-doubt or a means to self-reflexivity? Are we seeking to sublimate and justify a love for the arts through quests for relevance and progressive vanguardism, as a means to counteract charges of dilettantism? Or are we looking to reconcile our consciences to the privileges of a life in the academy through purposeful and actionable contemplations of moral responsibility? Contrarily, could it also be that we, like the poets cited in this section, are perhaps endeavoring to love differently?

CHAPTER 2

Humanism in the Time of Genocide

In one of the last works written during his lifetime, published a year after his demise, Edward Said elaborates on a practice of the humanities in post 9/11 America. His inquiry in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, one may argue, is more functional than philosophical.

> "I should stress again that I am treating this subject not in order to produce a history of humanism, nor an exploration or all its possible meanings, and certainly not a thoroughgoing examination of its metaphysical relationship to a prior Being in the manner of Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism.' What concerns me is humanism as a useable praxis for intellectuals and academics who want to know what they are doing, and who want also to connect these principles to the world in which they live as citizens" (Said 6).

The distinction he draws, for example, between his concerns in the present collection of essays and those expressed by Martin Heidegger in his "Letter on Humanism" is crucial in defining a context for his inquiry, which as elaborated shortly thereafter is firmly located in a United States of America, "more than ten years after the end of the Cold War." It is specifically within such a context that Said proposes his philology of humanism (7). What could "Humanism" mean against the backdrop of an ongoing "Global War on Terror" and military campaigns in the "Middle-East?" Would one have to reconsider the ways in which one uses and understands such a word when, for example, the 1999 bombings in Yugoslavia were justified by the NATO as being a "humanitarian intervention?" It is within such a context that Said asks whether one could still speak of "humanism" or "the humanities" in "serviceable" terms (7). More importantly, he further qualifies humanism, within a location such as a post 9/11 United States, as a potentially "usable praxes" for intellectuals and academics to "be in the world." What interests me in the position Said defines in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, is whether one could glean from it, a middle ground

between what Steiner calls a "proliferation of verbiage" and silence as "meaningful speech?" The real question at hand is whether or not we, as humanists who believe in the enduring relevance of our scholastic endeavors, can ensure that terms such as the humanities or humanism continue to be "serviceable" within the worlds we inhabit. For on one hand we have the moral indignation Steiner posits towards the end of "Silence and the Poet:" "If totalitarian rule is so effective as to break all chances of denunciation, of satire, then let the poet cease – and let the scholar cease from editing the classics a few miles down the road from the death camp" (Steiner, "Silence" 54). While on the other hand we have the position a poet such as Faiz subtly hints at through his own practice of poetry, could we envision ways to love differently – find a lexicon that at once derives meaning from and gives meaning to one's "being in the world.

The former is as Steiner would call it a "retreat from the word," ostensibly defined in terms of a finitude. Articulation seems to be impossible. Speaking truth to power, in the final analysis, is a futile exercise, because power in and of itself is an abstraction. However, that is not what one is seeking to address here. Democratic criticism, one might argue, refers to a set of discursive practices that are more systematized and of a more processual nature than isolated or idiosyncratic dissentient speech acts. It might be inferred that Said is suggesting that humanism as a "usable praxis" for intellectuals and academics, in some way contributes towards democratic criticism as an ongoing discursive practice. It might also be inferred, by extension, that Said implies democratic criticism as a possible means for humanism to be in the world:

> "For there is, in fact, no contradiction at all between the practice of humanism and the practice of participatory citizenship. Humanism is not about withdrawal and exclusion. Quite the reverse: its purpose is to make more things available to the critical scrutiny as the product of human labor, human energies for emancipation and enlightenment, and, just as importantly human misreadings and misinterpretations of the collective past and present" (Said 22).

Such claims for him are an incontrovertible foundation for a humanistic education. In the final analysis, however, Said seems to be most committed to language. Hence, one might argue that he seeks to present a philology of Humanism, in contrast to what he identifies in Heidegger's work as an ontological approach – "… a metaphysical relationship to a prior Being…" (6, 28).

We shall return to the philosophical or metaphysical later on in this study, for the time being, one might consider that the philological approach proposed by Said offers a sounder structural basis for understanding a practice of humanism, particularly within a scholastic context, in contrast to the more "metaphysical" interrelationalities of being in the world. There is no denying Said's claim that language is wherein any practice of humanism begins (28). What one perhaps needs to add to such a statement is the fact that it addresses almost exclusively articulated humanist discourses, not a "meaningful silence" as Steiner would define it or perhaps a silence that pertains to the Other in discourses of selfhood, often read, and not necessarily always in a Derridean sense, as an absence, specter or trace. Epistemes of alterity then at best become a lamentable loss or a melancholic absence. As we shall see later on in this work, in our readings of both Toni Morrison and Emmanuel Levinas, the Other is always configured as being otherwise than presence, and here in the Derridean sense, knowledge, especially discursive knowledge is always lent veracity through a "metaphysics of presence." It is the being that is beyond such discursivities of presence that is the Other who in the extreme is redered devoid of signification, or what Morrison will call a "signing" Other. However, for the present I would like to continue to focus on Said's understanding of the humanist capacity for episteme, and in this regard, one ought not perceive such a turn away from the "philosophical" as necessarily being a glaring flaw in the possible relationship that Said proposes between a practice of humanism and the processes of democratic criticism. It is important to bear in mind that the understanding he seeks to provide is

one of a humanism at work, as operational or at the very least operationalizable praxis: "Humanism is the achievement of form by human will and agency; it is neither system nor impersonal force like the market of the unconscious, however much one may believe in the workings of both" (15).

In choosing to address questions of serviceability and actionable praxes, Said also implicitly endorses a worldview that has historically held the realms of contemplation and action as being separated from one another. One might argue that such a focus on functionality is perhaps somewhat evocative of the ways in which Hannah Arendt defines the term *vita activa* in relation to the "Human Condition." Action, Arendt states, "is the only activity that goes between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt, *Human* 7). For her, *vita activa* designates three realms of fundamental human activity – namely labor, work and action, and while each of these realms of activity, "corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man," it is only action that is foundational to "being among men" (7). What happens as a result, Arendt argues, is over the ages notions of action either begin to be conflated with those of contemplation or the distinctions between labor, work and action begin to collapse, thereby causing *vita activa*, a notion that otherwise encompassed the entirety of human activities, to then receiving its meaning from the *vita contemplativa* (16). Such a hierarchization of contemplation over action becomes, she contends, all the more pronounced in Christian metaphysical thought, where the capacity for contemplation within the human condition is seen as a connectedness with divinity or a higher metaphysical order (15). While such a connectedness between contemplation and the apprehension of divinity in the phenomenal world, "the Christian truth of a living God" revealed only in "complete human stillness," is perhaps given greater emphasis in a protestant theological frame, it closely mirrors ideas relating to apprehending

mysteries of the cosmos and the phenomenal world in early Greek thought (15). Therefore, such configurations of contemplation as pertaining to the metaphysical, and the implicit conflation of contemplation and action, where contemplation is seen as the superior to all other human activities, Arendt contends, has been foundational to Western thought as a whole (21). Such an elevation of contemplation is what, one might argue, implies its divorce from "being in the world," or at the very least being in the world of action. One might also make the case that Said, like Arendt, through a philology of humanism seek to reconcile the realms of *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* in a functional and meaningful way.

Therefore, answering to questions regarding what one does in the world as a humanist, is perhaps a lot more straightforward than contemplating the nature of humanism in and of itself. As we shall see later on in this study, to engage with any question that begins with the inquiry, "What is…," is at least in part an engagement with ontology. Strategically speaking, functionality seems to often be the soundest defense when one's existential value is called into question. Hence, Said proceeds to sketch a history of the functionings of the humanities academy, which as he states informed his own practices as a scholar and teacher of literature and the humanities at Columbia University, starting in the early 1960s (Said 2-3). He specifies that such offerings under the humanities curriculum sought to ensure that every freshman or sophomore enrolled at the university was made familiar with the "core literary and philosophical canon of Western cultures" (4). The mainstays of Greek, Latin, English, French, German, Italian and Spanish literatures have remained the common fare within the humanities core across most American universities since the 1960s and 1970s. It is such a pedagogical history Said says, that provided him an "auspicious background" for inquiries into the "relevance and future of humanism in contemporary life." He

is not proposing a complete overhaul of the scholastic tradition within which he has functioned for nearly four decades. As he states:

> "My argument is intended as a continuation, within the Columbia context, of what my predecessors have said and done – predecessors, I hasten to add, who have made my many years at the institution so extraordinarily valuable to me. Despite my involvement in the struggle for Palestinian human rights, I have never taught anything but Western humanities at Columbia, literature and music in particular, and I intend to go on doing so as long as I can. But at the same time I think that the moment has come, for me at least, to reconsider, reexamine and reformulate the relevance of humanism as we head into a new millennium with so many circumstances undergoing enough dramatic change to transform the setting entirely" (6).

In the passages that follow, Said proposes his core inquiry in the book, which pertains to the usability and serviceability of an American practice of humanism within, what can only be defined as, a rapidly changing political, social and cultural milieu. Especially when one considers the immediate context for Said's reexamination and his need for a reformulation of the role of academic humanism in public discourses, one could read such reconsiderations as an extension of the profoundly pervasive impact that events such as the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 had on the American psyche. As he as often argued in several of his works, his own position in the academy was in many ways unique – while being intensely aware of the eurocentricity of the American academy he was equally formed and shaped by it. Such an awareness of positionality could be traced back to his work in *Orientalism* (1978). As he explains in all his subsequent responses to criticisms of his work, *Orientalism* was a study in representations of the "Orient" in "Occidental" cultures and discourses. However, it is not quite as simple as stating that Said's sole concern is preserving the "Western tradition," rather what he attempts in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* is, as he admits, a "reformulation" of academic humanism in a context of "changing bases" for its practices that were hitherto dominated by "Western" traditions, canons and knowledge systems. Most immediate to such reevaluations, one might surmise, were the

questions raised by the terror attacks of September 11, regarding the presence and status of the non-western Other within Euro-American contexts, and within an academic context such interrogations begin to most visibly manifest in discourses and pedagogies of alterity. For example, Said briefly references Samuel Huntington's 1996 bestseller *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, and how the events of 9/11 were in some way seen as a vindication of one of the book's core ideas – a timelessly renewable notion of conflict between the "West" and the "rest" (8). Now, for the purposes of his own reevaluation of the "sphere" of humanism, Said dismisses such notions of conflict "vaguely based on Samuel Huntington's deplorably vulgar and reductive thesis," as preposterous (8). However, looking back over the past two decades, one wonders whether it was prudent to have chosen to almost wholly ignore the resuscitation of such a divisive rhetoric of civilizational difference at such a crucial moment in history. Was it not precisely such a rhetoric of civilizational difference, later recast in an age-old mythology of "Good vs. Evil," as Arundhati Roy argues in her October 2001 essay titled "The Algebra of Infinite Justice," that was used to set into motion the still ongoing "Global War on Terror" (Roy, *Algebra* 153)? More importantly, going back to the image of infants in detention camps from the previous section, is there not a possible connection that can be made between assertions of civilizational superiority – concerns over the looming possibility of a loss of power or a dilution of national and cultural sovereignty, even if they are made in the form of as Huntington clarifies, "a descriptive hypothesis," and xenophobic sentiments that at times manifest in acts of egregious violence?[5]

Before we return to Said's reformulations on the practice of humanism in an "inhumane and genocidal" world, let us briefly consider yet another book published the very same year as *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: Powers of Mourning and*

[5] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations

Violence. Like Said, Butler too addresses questions relating to an idea of democratic criticism, but begins instead by problematizing the right to freedom of thought and expression and how such a right is circumscribed by state censorship in the framing of public opinion. In the opening passage of her book, Butler writes:

> "Since the events of September 11, we have seen both a rise in anti-intellectualism and a growing acceptance of censorship within the media. This could mean that we have support for these trends within the general population of the United States, but it could also mean that the media function as 'public voices' that operate as a distance from their constituency, that both report the 'voice' of the government for us, and whose proximity to that voice rests on an alliance or identification with that voice. Setting aside for the moment how the media act upon the public, whether, indeed, they have charged themselves with the task of structuring public sentiment and fidelity, it seems crucial to note that a critical relation to government has been severely, though not fully, suspended, and that the "criticism" or, indeed, independence of the media has been compromised in some unprecedented ways" (Butler, *Precarious* 1).

Butler's inquiry here is perhaps closer to my own inquiries in the previous section, particularly in contemplating the assassinations of Mahmood, Manan and Lankesh. Her interrogations have less to do with the academy, and more with public discourse, however, one might argue a shared ground between Butler and Said, in as much as they both address the nature of critique and dissent. The concern for Butler, however, is the designating through generating consensus in public opinion of that which is beyond critique. While, Said's arguments suggest that the interface between academic and public discourse have long been generating and perpetuating "truth claims" in support of that which lies beyond critique – notions that can seamlessly pass from descriptive hypotheses to incontrovertible truths. Postulations, for example, of incommensurable difference between the "West" and the "rest," that would later find vindication in public opinion, when public media would bring in those very postulators as experts to comment and consult on the justness and necessity of a Global War on Terror, while attention is subtly drawn away from the tremendous human cost at which such wars are waged. For years following the attacks of 9/11, American and

global news and public media have been flooded with commentaries and debates on what makes Islam an "inherently violent" religion and Muslims "naturally predisposed" towards terrorist acts. In tandem, the triumphs of Operation Enduring Freedom and Inherent Resolve were reported on with equal verve. I am not suggesting that the cost in terms of human lives went completely unreported. The civilians injured and killed were often framed in a context of tragic and unintended collateral in otherwise precise surgical strikes, while military lives lost in service were honored for having made the ultimate sacrifice in service to their nation. In 2016 Neta Crawford, one of three project directors with the Costs of War Project, a collective of 35 scholars, legal experts, human rights activists and physicians founded in 2011 to study and make available to public knowledge the human cost of the Global War on Terror, estimated the collective death toll tied to Operation Enduring Freedom's military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan alone at nearing two hundred thousand.[6]

Butler makes an interesting connection between an incapacity to mourn for the loss of such an overwhelmingly large number of lives and the controlled structuring of public opinion, especially following the 9/11 crisis. The insistence on survivalist triumphalism, the consolidation of international coalitions and planning a retaliatory course of action against terror that breached the safety of a national border that was once assumed to be impervious to such grave assault, all of which, let us remember, played out in public media, she argues, places a sanction on mourning and grieving experiences of loss and vulnerability (Butler 7). Such a consolidation of community or collectivity is grounded in an understanding of the task at hand, a retaliation against that which threatened "us," largely bypassing the, "task of mourning that follows," any experience of a

[6]https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2016/War%20in%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%20UPDATE_FINAL_corrected%20date.pdf

vulnerability to loss and loss itself (19). What Butler contemplates is whether a basis for community can be found in conditions of vulnerability that honors the place of grieving and mourning? It is from such a place that she posits her interrogations of "grievability" – what makes the loss of a life grievable, to whom and how (20)? For example, the nearly two hundred thousand lives lost in Afghanistan and Pakistan mentioned earlier as the estimated total death toll of Operation Enduring Freedom in the region – are the losses of all of these lives equally grievable? Or are we saying that certain lives, when lost, are more grievable than others, and what implications does such a quantification of grievability pose in our understanding of the worth of a human life?

In the light of such interrogations, Butler argues, that in order for one to deem the loss of life or a collectivity of lives as being less grievable or not grievable at all, there must be a preceding "derealization" of their humanity (34). It is such acts of derealization that she would later go on to argue, that constitutes a "precarious life." We shall return to a fuller exploration into this and other related concepts in a later chapter. What interests me for the moment, are the ways in which Butler channels such contemplations of precarity and grievability into an ethics of engagement and relationality towards the Other. In no uncertain terms, she suggests a direct correlation between the quantifications of grievability and a relationship with exteriority. Addressing the immediate human cost of a Global War on Terror, both in the US and in the otherwise located warzones, she states:

> "What effect did the killing of an estimated 200,000 Iraqi citizens, including tens of thousands of children, and the subsequent starvations of Muslim populations, predicted by Concern, a hunger relief organization, to reach six million by the year's end, have on Muslim views of the United States? Is a Muslim life as valuable as legibly as First World lives? Are the Palestinians yet accorded the status of 'human' in US policy and press coverage? Will those hundreds of thousands of Muslim lives lost in the last decade of strife ever receive the equivalent to the

> paragraph-long obituaries in the *New York Times* that seek to humanize – often through nationalist and familial framing devices – those Americans who have been violently killed? Is our capacity to mourn in global dimensions foreclosed precisely by the failure to conceive of Muslim and Arab lives and *lives*" (12)?

Now, taken out of context, such extended tirade of interrogations, would seem intentionally incendiary and inflammatory, and one is not denying such an intent either on the writer's part in deploying such a rhetoric. It certainly has shock-value. Butler, Roy and Said, in their own respective frames cite the very same passage from the address President Bush delivered at the launch of the anti-terrorism campaign in the wake of the 9/11 attacks: "Every nation, in every region, now has a choice to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." As Roy points out in her essay on the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing Global War on Terror, it is not necessarily that simple, and it should not be a choice one ought to be forced into making. It is not much of a choice, if those are the only available options, in so much as, one is not in support or aligning oneself with terrorism, when one points to the staggering human costs of a war, just or otherwise.

Here, once again, one may clearly perceive a crisis in the practice of democratic criticism, especially when such a practice is in dissent or critique of a majoritarian discourse or governmentality. More importantly, the crisis in any practice of democratic criticism is the Other or collectivities of alterity, that are designated as contrary in defining any collective selfhood. In what is now one of the most popularly quoted statements from *Precarious Life*, Butler says: "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something." As I stated earlier, we shall return to the question of alterity in a later chapter of this study. For the moment, I am more interested in the connections or relationalities that Butler suggests in moving from the ideological circumscription and conscription of public opinion, to experiences of vulnerability, to grief and its quantification, to the question of the Other and finally to possibly "positing a new

basis for humanism" through a recognition of shared "corporeal vulnerability" (42). Such a recognition of shared, albeit to relatively and contextually varying degrees, of precarity in "common" predicaments of systemically structured vulnerability, in Butler's reasoning is foundational to an ethical engagement with otherness. Such a recognition of vulnerability could just as easily be the basis for a new humanism, however, as she also suggests her observations have less to do with humanism and more with the understanding of vulnerability as a "precondition of the human" (43). It is such a recognition of "common corporeal vulnerability" that opens up possibilities for a recognition of the Other:

> "When we recognize another, or ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are, as we already are, as we have always been, as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself. Instead, in the asking, in the petition, we have already become something new, since we constituted by virtue of the address, a need and desire for the Other that takes place in language in the broadest sense, one without which we could not be. To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition of what one already is. It is to solicit becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other. It is also to stake one's own being, in the struggle for recognition" (44).

As she acknowledges shortly hereafter, Butler is engaging with a crisis inherent to epistemologies of the Other configured in terms of an ontology of the Self, what Kristeva would call a "Crisis of the Subject." Such a crisis stems from, either a recognition of vulnerability, shared or otherwise, as Butler suggests, or it may stem from the realization that the Other can never be hermeneutically or epistemologically exhausted through a location in one's subjective selfhood. The anxiety of ethics lies in the fact that one has nothing but a subjective selfhood in any encounter with the Other and in engagements with the exteriority of alterity. It is in such a sense, perhaps, that Butler means we undo one another, and one might surmise that it is such an undoing that is foundational to a relationality that constitutes being in the world. To be in the world, if we are to understand from Said's arguments in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, is participatory

citizenship and therefore to engage in a practice of democratic criticism. Both Butler and Said, found such praxes and practices of participatory citizenship, either on a global or a local scale, in acts of recognition pertaining to the human condition. For the former, being in the world is grounded in a recognition of the shared precarity of human life, while for the latter it is the recognition of the irreducible plurality of the human experience. Such a focus on a particular, does seem to undercut some of the fuzzy open-endedness of contemplation alone. Recognition as an action somehow seems to bridge the gap between the realms of action and contemplation. I have acted upon either myself or another through either recognizing or in asking to be recognized. Recognition may pave the way for future action, labor or work, but in its status as an action in and of itself, following from Arendt's arguments, it can itself be a basis for relationality, and therefore a basis for being in the world.

Such an approach grounded in "actionable" understandings of a recognition of something that facilitates the possibility for a future set of actions, lends a sense of both functionality and quantifiability to practices of humanism. Both Butler and Said seem to agree upon a focus on the discursive language, lexicon and referential universe of the humanities as a starting point. One could assume, for immediate purposes, that recognition or the transformative potential within acts of recognition that Butler alludes to, manifests discursively in language. Similarly, for Said, the recognition of plurality, which for him constitutes being in the world, and therefore manifests in both humanism and democratic criticism, through his philological predispositions, one might argue first finds expression in a new and inclusive lexicon for discourses in the humanities. However, if we are to think of practices of humanism as a pedagogical basis for democratic criticism, are we then suggesting a causal connection between pedagogies of a humanistic education and a capacity for critical thought? It would not be the first time such an argument would have been made, and it

would not be one that I entirely disagree with. However, the validation of an argument cannot lie in its mere postulation. Said states: "Humanism is the exertion of one's faculties in language in order to understand, reinterpret, and grapple with the products of language in history, other languages and other histories (Said 28). The statement leads into the following explanations he provides for "the changing situation of both language and humanistic practice at the present time." (29). The following chapter where such "changing bases" are explained, operating at least initially on the perceived or forced divide between the realms of action and contemplation, as explained by Arendt in *The Human Condition*. Especially in what he calls the "changing bases of humanistic study and practice," Said reminds us that one cannot think of the academy as a separate dehistoricized or depoliticized space (33-34). The examples he then proceeds to present that elucidate such an argument, only further support the historical isolationism and elitism of the American academy, leading one to the conclusion that, that which has been so long excluded, and ignored and realities of such an exclusion and oversight, must now be addressed (46).

> "I am not in a position here, nor is this the time, to try to provide a sketch of what those realities are, except to say that if a nationalistic or Eurocentric humanism served well enough in the past, it is of no use now for the many reasons I have outlined already. Ours is a society whose historical and cultural identity cannot be confined to one tradition or race or religion" (48).

Hence, an acknowledgement of the plurality within the worlds we inhabit, one might surmise is the beginning to a meaningful practice for the humanities today, and such a practice Said argues becomes meaningful by being in the world through acknowledging its inherent plurality. One cannot disagree with the sentiment Said espouses, but the question remains, how is one to begin such a process of acknowledgement? Is one speaking of a pedagogy, that leads to such a realization of plurality? More importantly, how does one negotiate, navigate and engage such plurality, once one has realized its existence?

Such a focus on the seemingly quantifiable is usually a measure in counteracting the fuzzy open-endedness of contemplation. Therefore, as in the earlier-cited poem, the poetic voice says, "ask no of…," a functional response would then be what can one ask of the poet (also the scholar and the academic), in a world assailed by "griefs far greater than the pangs of love." What purpose can "democratic criticism" serve in a world where it is seemingly futile to speak truth to power, where the mind is not without fear or knowledge is not free? More importantly, how does either a practice of humanism or democratic criticism respond to the demands of being in the world, in any demonstrable way? The overwhelming open-endedness of such inquiries, especially when one seeks to address them philosophically, one might argue, is responsible for the sense of anxiety surrounding a present and future serviceability of terms such as humanism and the humanities.

Therefore, in such a sense Said's approach in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* provides a useable functional basis for understanding the work of humanism and humanists in today's world. In our own field of Comparative Literature, such an approach might hold a key to answering an age-old question: what is Comparative Literature? This question, as any practitioner within the field would unwaveringly attest, has been an ongoing crisis. A cursory exploration into scholarship dealing with the history and method of the field would reveal that comparatists have responded to such crises both functionally and philosophically. In the following chapters I attempt to focus on the history of Comparative Literature from such functional perspectives. Firstly, what has a practice of Comparative Literature over the ages implied in structural and functional terms within the humanities academy? Secondly, how has a practice of Comparative Literature responded to the crises within a larger context of praxes within humanistic scholarship? While the scope of my concerns in the following study are global, I will be using the case of the field's history in India as a focalizer in demonstrating what I mean by such a functional basis in understanding a

history of the field. Finally, in the following chapters I will be seeking to demonstrate both the merits and shortcomings of such a functional approach to disciplinary historiographies, in a move towards more philosophical concerns within literary studies toady, particularly relating to questions regarding an ethics towards alterity in engaging with culturally "Other" texts.

CHAPTER 3

Collectivities of the Self and the Other: Crises in Comparative Literature and a Practice of Humanism

In his introduction to *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, Charles Bernheimer states Comparative Literature is "anxiogenic" (Bernheimer 1). Such a realization is in no way new for practitioners in the field, however, what is one to infer from such a statement, especially when the author himself offers little to no contextualization for it. Could one, for example, read into such an assertion a subtle note of subversive equivocation? As practitioners within fields such as Comparative Literature, we are well aware of subversive potentials inherent within our scholarly practices. Whether Bernheimer himself was alluding to such a subversive potential, remains uncertain, however, focusing on anxiogeny as opposed to the more often discussed notion of a crisis in practice seems to be more alluring, at least from a radically liberal humanist standpoint. That said, the question remains to be answered as to whether such a radical humanism responds to the crises, as Said would argue, within a practice of the humanities in an increasingly "inhumane" and "genocidal" world. Does it, to quote Said, provide a "usable praxis?"

While the present anxieties and crises may be more in line with Said's inquiries about any practice of the humanities in an increasingly "inhumane" and "genocidal" world, the feeling of anxieties surrounding issues of method and practice have been germane to Comparative Literature, since its very beginnings, as evidenced by the incessant reiterations of the question: "What is Comparative Literature?" by practitioners in the field. Attached to such ongoing interrogations of practice, field and discipline, have emerged notions of "anxiety" and "crisis," that have now

become part and parcel of our histories and legacies as comparatists. By this, on the most fundamental level, I mean that all of us who are associated with this field of inquiry within the humanities are aware of the crises in the defining what we do, in a larger or potentially generalizable sense. We have also felt, at some point in our journeys as comparatists, the more practical anxieties regarding employability tied to confusions surrounding the definability of a field/discipline such as Comparative Literature. Despite such anxieties, Comparative Literature has continued to exist across universities the world over. One cannot help but wonder if there exists a set of values or principles, methodological or otherwise, that might potentially unite the many iterations of the field/discipline across different global locationalities. More importantly, could one envision such a shared methodological or philosophical substratum for not only a practice of Comparative Literature, but the humanities as a whole, that is neither an assimilationist nor a reductionist view of an often-touted universal humanism. By this I mean a form of philosophical reasoning that assumes a fundamental uniformity of the human condition – placates the anxieties generated by a seemingly irresolvable plurality or polyvalence.

While, such a reckoning of plurality is anxiogenic, I would also argue that a recognition of pluralities is foundational to both a practice and praxis of Comparative Literature. On one hand, as we have seen from Said's arguments, all humanists share feelings of anxiety or uncertainties surrounding issues of methodology or in envisioning "usable praxes" within practices of the humanities, and perhaps even the larger "real-world implications' of the humanities. Yet another implication of such open-endedness, that also in turn might feed into the notion of a "crisis" in the humanities, is the fact that there is no singular "solution" or "answer" to such questions regarding usability or serviceability. Having endeavored in a field like Comparative Literature, one makes one's peace with an ever-looming sense of "crisis" or "anxiety" surrounding one's academic

practices and standing in the academy. To reiterate Bernheimer's position, a practice of Comparative Literature is "anxiogenic" (1). I am by no means here insinuating that comparatists in general, as opposed to other humanists, have a better understanding of, or are particularly better equipped to negotiate the kind of crisis Said delineates in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. In fact, I would argue that as comparatists we share a stake in "Humanism's Sphere," and therefore negotiate many of the same challenges and crises today, as our fellow humanists. I am, however, also stating that as comparatists we have historically, due to our unique positions within the spheres of humanism, had to navigate a unique set of challenges. Such challenges, I would argue are in many ways unique to Comparative Literature as a field or discipline, because from its very inception Comparative Literature has been intercultural and intersubjective by virtue of endeavoring to working across boundaries of language and nation. I will later argue that, our practices as comparatists, by virtue of being grounded in a long disciplinary history of intercultural and intersubjective praxes, in many ways responds to the crises in a contemporary academic practice of humanism, as identified by scholars such as Butler and Said. However, before such an argument can be made, one would first need to understand what working within a comparative frame entails. Having trained in Comparative Literature, for me the understanding of comparative frames begins in a study of literature. Robert J. Clements, in the foreword to his 1978 book, *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline: A Statement of Principles, Praxis and Standards*, recounts what is perhaps an only too familiar encounter between a comparatist and an English professor. At a conference in Palermo, two years prior to the publication of this book, Clements met an English professor at a university in the United Kingdom who said to him: "I say, you're in Comparative Literature, aren't you? Just what do you do? I judge it means studying the influence of French authors on the English and vice versa—English authors on the French. Right?"

(Clements xv). With a composure that could only come from an enduring patience born of experiences of many such encounters, Clements responds:

> "Let me assure you at the outset that we comparatists do not pretend a knowledge of what the French call *littérature universelle*. We don't know everything about everything. What we do know are a few approaches to literature in the Western tradition—mainly through theme, form, or movement, and a couple of interrelations—and the books that best illustrate these" (xv).

Questions such as, "what exactly is it that you do?" or "what do you compare?" are only too familiar to the comparatist. The question can be answered in one of two different ways, functionally or philosophically. Following Said's example, let us first seek a functional approach to answering this question. To put it in purely utilitarian (and perhaps fiscally justifiable) terms; what purpose does a department of Comparative Literature serve within a university curriculum? We return here to Clements' earlier cited conversation with his British colleague. Clements proceeds to acknowledge that, in his experience, the "books that best illustrate," tend to be, "almost of necessity," "major works of major writers" (xvi). Such an awareness of canonicity has come to be particularly true of the space Comparative Literature and its practitioners continue to inhabit within Liberal Arts curricula in universities across the United States (xvii). In a certain sense, it would not be entirely erroneous to state that, one signs up for classes with a Comparative Literature department either out of one's own volitions or because one is forced to do so by curricular requirements. Either way, one ends up reading a sampling of literary works not commonly read, and even less so in conjunction with one another, within the curricula of national literature departments. For example, speaking from my own experiences of having studied Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University in Kolkata at the undergraduate and graduate levels, a typical first-year undergraduate seminar on "Literatures of the Ancient World" would include selections from the epic, lyric and dramatic traditions of as many ancient literary cultures as possible:

Sumerian, Tamil, Sanskrit, Greek, Roman, Persian, Arabic, Norse and Old English, to name a few. The study of these selections, similar to the American context referenced by Clements, were organized around theme, form, movement and literary interrelations to the best extent possible. Such a seemingly superficial phenotypic presentation of literary samplings, dovetails wonderfully, and especially so in contexts like the US, with present-day pedagogical requirements for a "culturally diverse" education. The fulfilling of such requirements certainly behooves our cause, insomuch as it makes for a strong case for our existence and fiscal support within university systems. And therefore, the skills one acquires through a training in Comparative Literature certainly provide a competitive edge in teaching to generalist curricula like "World Literature," a term that Clements incidentally acknowledges as being, "a much-abused term in America" (7). While he does not proffer a substantial explanation for such an assessment of "World Literature," one could surmise Clements is drawing upon his earlier criticism of the limitations of a "Great Books" approach (xvi).

We shall return to "World Literature" and a critical inquiry into its current status in relation to Comparative Literature, later on in this work. For now, I would like to reflect for a bit on what lies at the core of this present study. I begin with what I find particularly useful in Clements's approach to unpacking a practice of Comparative Literature. Clements states in no uncertain terms that his approach is descriptive, rather than prescriptive, in so much as any inferences drawn regarding possible definitions of a practice of Comparative Literature, are gleaned from a descriptive pedagogical historiography of the field (7). Now, for those of us who have come to expect from the average book on Comparative Literature, more dramatic proclamations of deaths, resurrections and second-comings, Clements' book would seem painfully mundane and too "brass tacks." Other than a dry yet caustic wit that is often directed at university administrators, and the

detriment that their sometimes-limited faculties of reasoning have on the functionings of Comparative Literature departments, there is very little in the way of any theatricality in this book (61-67). The attention to minutia ranging from issues such as hiring and budgeting, to the crafting of requirements for undergraduate majors and minors, defining parameters for graduate curricula and doctoral qualifying exams, might seem excessive at first. It is only upon closer reflection, one realizes that one is dealing with a comparatist "in the trenches," so to speak. Clements' descriptive approach in *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline*, supplemented by an extensive documentation of syllabi, course descriptions and programs of study, gives the reader a sense of an academic discipline in practice, and from such a descriptive approach Clements tries to convey his sense of a praxis for Comparative Literature.

A question of praxis, in my experience, though grounded in functionality, does also spill over into more philosophical and contemplative realms. The question of what one does and how, for me at least, seems inseparable from the question of why one does it. As comparatists, we are not quite as accustomed to being asked this question in particular: "Why do you do Comparative Literature?" How does one begin to answer such a question? Is this a matter of feeling alone or is there a "real-world" justification for the choice of one's academic praxis and practice? I understand the present train of thought seems a bit absurd, and certainly were I to press myself for an answer to this question, my own results would seem inconclusive. However, a slight rephrasing of the question to broaden its scope makes slightly easier to navigate. And, so if I were asked what purpose does or can the practice of Comparative Literature serve, constructing a response and defense seems slightly easier. From the locational and contextual coordinates of my training, the historical need for a practice like Comparative Literature becomes very clear. The department at Jadavpur University, mentioned earlier, was established in 1956 by poet and literary scholar

Buddhadeva Bose. It is no surprise, as Ipshita Chanda points out in an interview with Sahapedia, that India's first department of Comparative Literature was established at an institution that grew out of the National Bengal College, the seat of the National Council of Education (NCE) where Rabindranath Tagore delivered his historical lecture on "*Viswa Sahitya*" or world literature in 1907. The NCE was founded in 1906 in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in British India with the intent of providing education, especially at the higher levels, that was more in keeping with national (or nationalist) concerns at the time. Leading anti-imperialist thinkers at the time viewed the University of Calcutta, established by the colonial British government in 1857, as a predominantly Western institution, instrumental in securing an urban elite colonial middle-class that was favorably disposed towards British and European cultural values. Furthermore, the reforms proposed by the Indian Universities Commission appointed by the then viceroy of British India, George Curzon, and the Indian Universities Act of 1904, served towards only further confirming such suspicions. The act severely limited access to university education for Indians, and unabashedly favored universities and colleges that were either British run or sympathetic to the imperial cause. The NCE was founded in an almost direct response to the Indian Universities Act of 1904, in keeping with the spirit of the *swadeshi* movement that was gaining ground at the time – an educational infrastructure for Indians by Indians.

In February 1907, Tagore was invited to speak at the National Bengal Institute to deliver a lecture on Comparative Literature. Acknowledging that he had been asked to speak about Comparative Literature, India's then yet to be Nobel laureate, instead chose to speak about *Viswa Sahitya* or world literature (Bose 3). The lecture has now become a part of an inherited "creation myth" in the Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University – it was as Chanda remarks, "a blossoming of history." The fact that the NCE had asked Tagore to speak about

Comparative Literature as early as 1907, nearly five decades before the first department was officially established in the country, perhaps indicates that the nationalists and anti-imperialists in India at the time saw some value or potential in this field of study. Perhaps they saw it as a means, if nothing else, to undercut the sovereignty of British literature and culture over the young Western-educated minds of colonial India. Bose later acknowledges an indebtedness to Tagore's idea of *Vishwa Sahitya* in writing about the state of the discipline in India for the 1959 issue of the *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*. Largely unknown in India before being first introduced at Jadavpur University in 1956, Bose argues that Comparative Literature was a culmination of historical processes that far predated its official institution in India (1). It is here that he harks back to Tagore's 1907 lecture at the NCE, wherein Tagore hailed "Literature" as a shared universal expression of all humankind, and stated therefore that any contemplation of the literary would only be complete through a contemplation of "World-Literature" (3). For Tagore, World Literature was not merely a sum total of literary works composed by individuals from different parts of the world, it was the ultimate expression of a "universal spirit" that united all humankind across the boundaries of nation and language (3). Such a call for unity and an affirming of the universality of the human spirit becomes all the more poignant against a backdrop of the first partition of Bengal along explicitly communal lines into the East and West Bengal provinces, the former predominantly populated by Muslims and the latter predominantly Hindu. The partition came into effect on the 16th of October 1905 under the viceroyship of Lord Curzon, only further exacerbating communal tensions in British India. At several points in his lecture, Tagore urged his audience to think beyond the immediate, the individual and the local (3). In this particular context, Tagore was not speaking in abstractions, but rather addressing the very real and immediate crisis of growing communal disharmony in the country. Looking towards a realization of harmony in

the universal human spirit was, in his understanding, the only way to counteract immediate disputes between individual interest groups and local discords. Such a harmony could begin in a contemplation of the "World," at least on a conceptual level, in the literary (3).

Bose saw in Tagore's conception of "World Literature" more than just a convenient invoking of a relatable and accessible mythology for a nascent discipline in India. He reads into Tagore's vison of a "World Literature" a philosophy and an aesthetic comparable to Goethe's call for *Weltliteratur* (2). While using the comparison to Goethe as a relatable point of reference to the rise of Comparative Literature in Europe and America, in his 1959 report Bose stated that Comparative Literature in India responded to a "very real need" (4). He saw it as the only means to counteracting the "virtually exclusive" esteem that English literature continued to be held in within the Indian academy (4). This would be made possible, Bose argued, through the fostering appreciation for Western Literatures other than English that a practice of Comparative Literature would facilitate (5). In this sense, Bose finds Tagore's postulations on *Viswa Sahitya* similar to the interpretation of Goethe's positing *Weltliteratur* as an antidote to Napoleonic French cultural imperialism (Chanda, "Can the Non-Western" 58). He stresses such a parallelism between *Weltliteratur* and *Viswa Sahitya* at various points in his report, emphasizing in particular the methodological implications of such a philosophical worldview in literary studies. Framing a defense against the most commonly levied charge against the practice of Comparative Literature, the teaching of the literatures of the world in translation, Bose writes:

> "In any case, the loss is more on the subtler points of craftsmanship than substance. And the least can be said of substance is that it engages the attention of all, whereas craft is of interest primarily to other writers. Goethe went to the length of saying that though he honoured rhythm and rhyme 'by which poetry first becomes poetry, … what is genuinely and deeply effective, what forms and advances us, is what remains of a poet when he has been translated into prose.' All poets may not agree with Goethe, but I feel professors must" (Bose 8).

For his own part Bose acknowledges an indebtedness to Tagore's vision of *Viswa Sahitya* and the notion of a "world-hunger" that Tagore mentioned in relation to the dawn of the modern era in India (10). This hunger for "the world," in Tagore's case, manifested both a broadening of the Indian literary horizon, but also served as a means to counteract the hegemony of a colonial Anglo-centric modernity for Bose (5). Bringing the world to the Indian literary consciousness, and particularly other modern European literatures, for him emphasized the fact that there was more to Europe than one could limitedly access through British culture, as evidenced by his translations of Baudelaire, Rilke and Hölderlin into Bengali (5). To ensure that his vision of a more diverse literary modernity beyond the predominant Anglophilia of the urban educated elite be brought to fruition, Bose sought the help of like-minded scholars and litterateurs to build Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University. For example, he brought acclaimed fellow modernist poet Sudhindranath Dutta, known also for his translations of Mallarme into Bengali, to teach at the department. As Chanda observes, it was often said that the first generation of comparatists at Jadavpur, used the department as a means to read and teach the poetry and literature they were most interested in reading.[7] And, while such an approach did open the literary imaginations of a generation of Indian literary scholars, poets and writers to the heterogeneities within European modernities, their understanding of the literary in the Indian context was limited to antiquity. Such a strange unevenness of approach, marked by an education in classical Sanskrit off-set by an interest in contemporary European literatures, shaped the early years of comparative scholarship in India. However, as Chanda argues, this was how history expressed itself through and in the practice of Comparative Literature at the time. It was such an approach that shaped the next generation of scholars and teachers, who incidentally were the first students of the department at

[7] https://www.sahapedia.org/culture-process

Jadavpur. However, the focus of the field starts to shift when the first generation of students became the second generation of teachers. While they were very much influenced by the modernist aesthetic that inspired their predecessors, modernism for the second generation of comparatists at Jadavpur was not limited to Europe alone. Chanda mentions the work of Manabendra Bandyopadhyay who, along with contemporaries like Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Amiya Dev, Naresh Guha and Swapan Majumdar introduced the study of modernisms in former European colonies to the practice of Comparative Literature in India.

Bandyopadhyay, who wrote most extensively in Bengali, sought to examine the influences and receptions of European modernisms in the literary modernisms of Latin America, the Caribbean and the larger Francophone African world. Bandhyopadhyay carried forward the legacy of translation started by the first generation of comparatists at Jadavpur, known for his translations of works by Pablo Neruda, Nicanor Parra, Aimé Césaire and Gabriel Garcia Marquez into Bengali, he also generated a body of scholarship that created a more conducive context for the study of Indian literary modernities. The scholarship dealing with the modernisms of other postcolonial contexts such as South America and continental Africa created a locus for comparative literary studies that resonated more with modernisms closer to home, in Indian language literatures, than the "East-West comparisons" of the previous generation of comparative scholarship. Therefore, as Chanda rightly argues, it was the focus on Europe and the heterogeneities within European modernisms, that also ultimately facilitated the move beyond Europe and into the modernisms of the former colonies, but more importantly also expanded the study of Indian literatures beyond classical antiquity to a focus on the heterogeneities and pluralities of modern Indian language literatures or as they are more commonly called the *bhāśā* literatures. Such a change in focus, moving from Europe into the former colonies and finally the shared resonances of postcoloniality

in Indian *bhāśā* literatures, that happens around the 1970s at Jadavpur, has continued to be a guiding principle within the practice of Comparative Literature in India (ibid).

In bringing to light such a historical context for the study and practice of Comparative Literature in India, I firstly seek to posit the practice of the discipline/field in India as a counter point to its present practice in the Euro-American humanities academy. Secondly, through invoking the history of Comparative Literature in India, I hope to further my own arguments regarding possibilities for a shared praxis for comparatists. Especially focusing such concerns that are no doubt shared, but manifest differently in different historical, cultural and socio-political contexts. Bearing in mind these two intentions, I now seek to explore the persistently enduring question in the history of our field. What is Comparative Literature? While responses to this question have been proffered and reiterated *ad nauseam* in a variety of contexts and configurations, let us begin with a definition that was hailed by the ninth congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) as the best definition of the discipline yet (Dominguez, Saussy and Villanueva 5). German-born American comparatist and former professor of Comparative Literature and Germanic and West European Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, the late Henry Remak stated:

> "Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country and the study of relationships between literature on one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the (fine) arts, philosophy, history, the social sciences, the sciences, religion, etc. on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression" (5).

Remak's is perhaps one of the most specific, but also one of the broadest definitions of Comparative Literature as both a praxis and a field of inquiry. To point out the seemingly obvious from Remak's definition, Comparative Literature is first and foremost an approach to or methodology for the study of literature. Secondly, nowhere in his definition does it say that such

an approach or method can be applied only to the study of European literatures. And therefore, I would like that we once and for all dispense with this notion that Comparative Literature as an approach or a methodology is inherently or in and of itself Eurocentric. How do I propose something so preposterous you ask, especially when the bulk of the critiques coming from both within and without the field have been centered around its inherent Eurocentrism?

An answer to this seeming conundrum, in my opinion, is summed up rather easily in the thesis of René Wellek's famous 1958 lecture, "The Crisis in Comparative Literature." The lecture was delivered at the second congress of the ICLA held at Chapel Hill, North Carolina that year. It was the first congress of the ICLA in the United States. Later, writing about the response his talk received, Wellek reminds us that the first congress of the ICLA held at Venice in September 1955 had no participation from the United States on account of issues with scheduling (Wellek, "Comparative Literature Today," 325). He reflects on how, within such ostensibly fraught relations between the European and American contingents at the Chapel Hill congress, his uncompromising critique of the practice of Comparative Literature in Europe, was misunderstood as a "manifesto for an American school of Comparative Literature and as an attack on the French school" (329). Such a response, he states, was most unfortunate on at least two accounts. Firstly, he had been critical of the French model for quite a while then, and the congress of 1958 was merely one such occasion when he had voiced his opinions in the presence of his European colleagues (326). Secondly, his critique had been directed "at method and not nation" (329).

The last clarification regarding the critique of method, is central to Wellek's thesis in "The Crisis of Comparative Literature." Wellek identifies Comparative Literature as a "mode of literary study," as early as 1942 in *Theory of Literature*, a work that he co-authored with Austin Warren (Wellek and Warren, 46). Even here, he does not identify a single approach or field of inquiry that

can be definitively qualified as Comparative Literature, per se (46). He enumerates the different senses in which the term has been used, ranging from the study of "folklore" and oral narratives, to the more structured approach of the French "*rapports de fait*" model (47). Such an openness to the idea of what Comparative Literature as a scholarly practice can be, gives us a somewhat clear basis for understanding Wellek's criticisms of the French model in "The Crisis of Comparative Literature." His criticisms are contextualized within a larger Western context of the state of the humanities and literary scholarship therein, at the turn of the 20th century and the onset of the First World War (Wellek, "The Crisis…" 162). Wellek ascribes the "crisis" to Comparative Literature's failures in defining: "a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology" (162). These two axes, upon which Wellek predicates his thesis in this essay, are in my opinion at the core of the challenges faced by comparatists across the world. The first, the problem of defining "subject matter," I would propose has to do with the question of practice, while the second axis or the question of methodology, operates more in the realm of what I am calling a praxis of Comparative Literature, and in order to effectively respond to my central question in this chapter: "What does it mean to be comparatist?" both these axes need to be equally weighted.

One can easily detect upon closer reading that the two problems – "subject matter" and "methodology," for the most part in Wellek's understanding are inseparable. Such an interrelatedness of these two questions becomes most apparent in his criticism of the French model, and the ways in which it sought to distinguish the practice of Comparative Literature, from the study of "national literatures" (163). The majority of such confusions surrounding definitions of field and method come from, Wellek argues, scholars such as Paul Van Tieghem and his followers, and their continued investment in older nineteenth century models for literary scholarship based on "positivistic factualism" that often manifested as a narrow study of "sources and influences"

(164). And here, the comment Clements' encounters from his British colleague, perhaps rings most true. The difference according to Van Tieghem between "comparative" and "general" literature was that the former exclusively focused on the interrelations between two national literatures, while the latter was more concerned with "movements and fashions which swept through several literatures" (162). Such forced demarcations between the subject matters of categories such as "general literature" or "*littérature universelle*" and "comparative literature," Wellek deems, are unproductive in the final analysis, because even when they seek to open-up the canons for literary scholarship, they amount to no more than a mechanistic study of literary "foreign trade." He writes:

> "The desire to confine 'comparative literature' to the study of the foreign trade of two literatures limits it to a concern with externals, with second-rate writers, with translations, travel books, 'intermediaries'; in short, it makes 'comparative literature' a mere subdiscipline investigating data about the foreign sources and reputations of writers" (162).

One may infer from such a statement, that Wellek is more concerned with how one approaches the study of literature, rather than the actual *roh Stoff* and even *Stoff* of one's scholarship. And hence, he is more severe in his critique of practitioners such as Guyard, Carré and Baldensperger, who through their works sought to include "national perceptions" of other national literatures within the scope of Comparative Literature. Making references to studies such as Fernand Baldensperger's *Goethe en France: Essai de littérature comparée* (1904) and Jean-Marie Carré's *Goethe en Angleterre: Étude de littératur comparée* (1920), as examples of such scholarship, Wellek argues, that they only contributed towards reiterating the very exact narrow nationalistic isolationism of nineteenth century literary scholarship that Comparative Literature arose in response to and sought to undercut (165). Similarly, Baldensperger's attempt in his introduction to the first volume of *Revue de littérature compare*, a journal he co-founded with fellow French comparatist Paul Hazard in 1921, to broaden the scope of the discipline through a focus on "minor

writers," according to Wellek only further obfuscates questions of methodology (165). The focus still, despite such apparent attempts towards opening up of the discipline's field of inquiry, was in the final analysis a historiography of verifiable literary transactions (165). In concluding his programmatic prescription for comparatists Baldensperger, Wellek argues, problematically links a certain re-evaluation of the canons thourgh the inclusion of "minor" entities, to the foundation of a "New Humanism," wherein such re-evaluations of the "old" would work towards building "a less uncertain core of common values" for a "dislocated humanity" (165).

While he does not speak of a "New Humanism" and his modes of operation vary significantly from those of Baldensperger, Wellek's aspirations for the future of Comparative Literature do align with his predecessors, at least in spirit. He concludes his lament over the ongoing and seemingly interminable crisis in the field on a hopeful and almost Romantic note:

> "But once we conceive of literature not as an argument in the warfare of cultural prestige, or as a commodity of foreign trade or even as an indicator of national psychology we shall obtain the only true objectivity obtainable to man. It will not be a neutral scientism, an indifferent relativism and historicism but a confrontation with the objects in their essence: a dispassionate but intense contemplation which will lead to analysis and finally to judgments of value. Once we grasp the nature of art and poetry, its victory over human mortality and destiny, its creation of a new world of the imagination, national vanities will disappear. Man, universal man, man everywhere and at any time, in all his variety, emerges and literary scholarship ceases to be an antiquarian pastime, a calculus of national credits and debts and even a mapping of networks of relationships. Literary scholarship becomes an act of the imagination, like art itself, and thus a preserver and creator of the highest values of mankind" (171).

Wellek's mention of the "universal man" seems almost to echo Bose's evocations of Tagore's notion of "world hunger" or a hunger for "the world." The "universal man" can only be realized through a hunger for "the world." And thus, Wellek's concerns are still a "core of common values" and a "displaced humanity," however unlike Baldensperger and his other predecessors, he does not see a true "world hunger" being sated by mere gestures of inclusion. This is not a hunger, if

we reflect upon Bose's explication of Tagore's idea of *Viswa Sahitya*, that is ever really sated. Any attempt to satiate this hunger only whets one's appetite for more.

The question then, is how does literary scholarship itself become "art." This is, one might argue, a question that perhaps necessitates a more philosophical contemplation of what one does, especially if one is seeking to further understand what Baldensperger defines as a "less uncertain core of common values" for a "displaced humanity." One could extend the notion of a "displaced humanity," building on Said's aforementioned arguments from *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* to what one might call a displaced humanities. There might be a few ways in which one might interpret the qualifier "displaced" in the context of a practice of the humanities today. In her controversially famous book on the state of Comparative Literature in United States at the turn of the millennium, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak acknowledges that our realities, academic or otherwise, are constantly impacted by the "forces of people moving about the world" (Spivak 3). So, on the most literal level any practice of the Humanities today, is in one way or another obligated to engage with displaced humanities. The cause for such a reckoning, at least in Said's estimation, comes from inhabiting an "inhumane" and "genocidal" world. Therefore, one is called upon, as we began to explore in our reading of Faiz's poem, to justify one's love for art and poetry in a world that is ravaged daily by violence and wars. The argument often made is that contemplation of beauty is inherently at odds with a world ravaged by suffering. And one cannot deny that the "pleasure of the text" does seem frivolous and incongruous when compared to images of motionless eyes of dead infants staring out from under mountains of debris in Syria or Gaza. However, I am also tempted to ask here, when did this become a valid or viable comparison? While a love for the arts and grief for the sufferings of the world may be arguably separate psycho-emotional processes, are they inherently mutually exclusive? Is this the central argument that an

enduring quest of a “New Humanism” seeks to convey in the present context? The fact that a practice of the humanities is impossible or unserviceable in the worlds we presently inhabit? If that is the case then the humanism or the humanities we speak of today is vastly different from the kinds we encounter in imaginations of comparatists and humanists such as Goethe, Tagore, Bose, Balgensperger or even Wellek. Is the “New” in “New Humanism” today, no more than an admission of an impossibility for a shared praxis or is it the impossibility of viable or serviceable practice? And, if so, are such articulations of impossibility of any use in addressing the needs of a “displaced humanity?”

CHAPTER 4

Placements and Displacements: Globalities and Locationalities in Contemporary Practices of Comparative Literature

I return again to *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* for a fuller interrogation of Said's thesis therein. In the first chapter, Said delineates what he calls "Humanism's Sphere." As emphasized earlier, such a delineation for Said continues to be centered around humanist scholarship stemming from a Euro-American context and perspective. For the time being, I posit this more as an acknowledgement rather than a criticism, as a recognition of centralities, locationalities and directionalities operational within global networks that inform located or locational humanist discursive practices. As practitioners inhabiting and acting in "Humanism's Sphere" one might, as Said does in this book, think of the shared struggles and challenges faced by humanists – struggles and challenges that have come to be in one way or another of a globally systemic nature. However, it becomes equally important to emphasize that these crises, while projected as systemically shared in a larger global context, are focalized through a Western Euro-American perspective in Said's work. Such an approach, as we shall see, is not unique to Said's work, a similar position is adopted by Spivak as well in her book *Death of a Discipline*. As Chanda retorts in her response to Spivak's thesis in the book, if Comparative Literatur, or in Said's case "Humanism's Sphere", is truly in the state that Spivak describes it as being—elitist, Eurocentric and divorced from the realities of the day and age, then it is truly surprising that it has survived so long (Chanda, "Can the Non-Western…" 59). In the final analysis, what can be gleaned from

Spivak's arguments in a work like *Death of a Discipline* is that disciplines or practices such as Comparative Literature have become redundant, because they have failed to respond to the "forces of people moving about the world." We see a similar ethos running through Said's *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* as well. In his critique of the Eurocentric American humanities academy, Said envisions the possibility of a "different kind" of "cosmopolitan" humanism (Said 11).

The cosmopolitanism that Said speaks of is, one might argue, qualitatively very different from the "world hunger" that Bose spoke of in invoking Tagore. The "world hunger" in the Tagorean or Goethean worldview, is a desire, a curiosity, a longing for the Other. The cosmopolitanism of "world hunger," is to borrow Barthes' term, *A Lovers' Discourse*: "a portrait—but not a psychological portrait, a structural one which offers the reader a discursive site – the site of someone speaking within himself, *amorously*, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak" (Barthes 3). This desire for the Other, in Bose's invocation of Tagore, answers to what according to him is a very real need in the context of postcolonial India. Even so, the effort was to explore and make proximal a distant Other or an absentee "loved object." The result was a certain kind of cosmopolitan sensibility, through the practice of Comparative Literature, but that was not what was being sought in such endeavors of reaching out to foreign literatures and cultures. Therefore, when Said speaks of the possibility of a "different kind" of "cosmopolitan" humanism, the sense that one gets is that humanistic endeavors are undertaken in order to arrive at such a sense of cosmopolitanism. And while such pleas for cosmopolitanism seem to take on a rhetoric similar to the aforementioned desire for the Other or the foreign a subtle difference can, however, be discerned. Hence, while Said concludes his first essay in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, by invoking a true humanism that cannot be limited to "extolling patriotically the virtues of our culture, our language, our monuments," he also uses this invocation as the basis to further explore

the "changing bases of humanist study and practice" in the United States (28-29). The demand, be that for inclusive structures and apparatuses of scholarship or for an opening up of the canon, comes from the immediate exigencies of an already existing and ever increasing ethnic, racial and linguistic diversity in the citizenry of the United States. Therefore, the desire for the cosmopolitan is not towards a distant or absentee foreign Other, but rather a politics in demographic representationality of an already underrepresented cosmopolitan citizenry.

What Said, describes as "cosmopolitan" in his work, has often also been understood under the rubrics of multiculturalism, both institutional and otherwise, in the American context. The symbolic imagery of the "melting pot" or the "salad bowl" have long been used to describe "multicultural" America. However, as Dorothy Figueira argues in *Otherwise Occupied: Pedagogies of Alterity and the Brahminization of Theory*, the foundational flaw in such conceptions of multiculturality, is the assumptions of an essential and shared core of "cultural values" that binds a diverse citizenry into a united or unified nationhood (Figueira 19). Therefore, the discourse of American multiculturalism while recognizing difference and its significance, still continues to operate on the assimilationist notion of a "common culture" that unites diverse populations as American, albeit hyphenated (19). As Figueira would argue in *Otherwise Occupied*, institutional multiculturalism in university curricula for the humanities, functions towards a furtherance of the diversity management and sensitivity initiatives of American governmentality (16-17). Therefore, as she observes in the example of the University of Georgia and the instituting of multicultural requirements in the undergraduate curriculum, the "multicultural" is often configured in terms of the "domestic" rather than the global or the international (17). Such a "domestic" approach is seen in determining courses that fulfil the universities' multicultural curricular requirements. In fields of literary studies, national-language literatures or Comparative

Literature, such requirements continue to be almost exclusively met through a study of literatures reflecting or stemming from an "ethnic-American" experience, while the study of the literatures of the world are met with covert and sometimes overt accusations of academic elitism (17).

Hence, when Said foregrounds the American context, while in the same breath invoking a global vision, one cannot help but wonder if he is in fact speaking of the national global microcosm characterized by a multiethnic-American citizenry. While the addressing of such internal or domestic concerns are not unproductive in an immediate national context, it is the global export-value of such domestic concerns that becomes contestable. Hence, for example, when Said expounds on the crisis within the American humanities academy following the terror attacks of 9/11, it is not as much his delineation of the crisis that I find problematic, but rather the claim of a global relevance (2). Yet again, I am not denying the existence of a global crisis in the practice of the humanities either, what I am arguing though, is that such a crisis or crises manifest differently in different locational contexts. However, what I seek to more immediately interrogate, is whether such "national" or "domestic" concerns can be a productive basis for the practice of Comparative Literature.

As we have already observed with Wellek's arguments in "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" and his reflections on the response it received, ours is a field that cannot, by definition, be limited to national concerns alone. Conversely, as a comparatist one cannot deny the locatedness of one's practice either. And therefore, as evidenced by the example of the brief early history of the field in India, the need for Comparative Literature in a national or cultural location is determined by complex and specific historio-political processes. Therefore, a statement like "Comparative Literature is anxiogenic," as proclaimed by Charles Bernheimer at the start of his editor's introduction to the 1995 state of the discipline volume, *Comparative Literature in the Age*

of Multiculturalism, begs a few clarifying questions. Anxiogenic how, where, when and to whom? Unqualified such a statement assumes the status of a universal truth, as though one were saying; the sun rises in the east. In qualifying such a seemingly incontrovertible statement, Bernheimer indulges in a brief reverie of an eager female graduate student in Comparative Literature, who after two years of graduate work in the discipline awakens to the shocking realization "that she has no firm ground underfoot," despite having done significantly more work than her peers in "national literature departments" (1). The breadth of knowledge and felicity in multiple fields that her studies have furnished for her are, according to Bernheimer, both a boon and a bane (1). An age-old maxim seems to be invoked here in slightly altered terms. She is a "Jane of many trades," but her mastery of any one of them seems uncertain. Caught between, what Bernheimer describes as, the comparatist's ability to don many hats and accusations of dilettantism, her own academic life and her prospects of employability (or lack thereof) are both equally anxiogenic (1).

The latter, given my own present predicament of uncertainty, resonates with me more than the former—as I am certain it does with all individuals who find themselves in Comparative Literature graduate programs across the world. However, as stated earlier, what intrigues me most about Bernheimer's proclamation of anxiety is an absence of qualifiers. Who is the subject in whom Comparative Literature generates anxiety? What is the location of such an anxious subject in both space and time? Is the anxious subject a practitioner of Comparative Literature or not? For example, having grown-up in an education system that continues to be haunted by the very much alive remnants of the *Raj*, I could see how such a discipline, and I return to the example of Jadavpur University, could generate great anxiety in vanguards of the sacred British canons of literature and literary sensibilities, the same historical context, as we see in Bose's thesis, that a discipline like Comparative Literature responded to in post-independence India. The fact that the Comparative

Literature and English Departments at Jadavpur University continue to be housed on two wings of the same floor of the Undergraduate Arts and Humanities Building, makes for an interesting and sometimes anxiogenic cohabitation. As an undergraduate student walking the corridors of that building, one often heard comments such as, Comparative Literature is for the less intelligent and the less fortunate, in other words for those who were denied the providence of finding admittance into the university's English program. I grew up in Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, witnessing many alleged turf wars between the two Departments – over everything ranging from the right to teach Derrida to the right to teach Tagore, both of course in English translations. I also came to realize that these were conflicts not unique to Jadavpur but were endemic to Comparative Literature in general. It was clear to me then, why Comparative Literature was anxiogenic to the non-comparatist, who more often than not viewed the comparatist as an academic poacher. Such a view of comparatists as scholastic poachers is somewhat understandable if one considers Henry Remak's definition of the comparatist's field of operation, cited in the previous section. The expansion of comparativist research beyond the immediate confines of literary scholarship to the more interdisciplinary approachs, that would necessitate engagements with "other areas of knowledge and belief," could quite legitimately seem like an infringement to practitioners in these "other areas."

However, it becomes increasingly apparent, as one reads ahead, that Bernheimer is speaking to the anxieties that the discipline generates in its practitioners, and not to those it causes for non-practitioners. The brief reverie in which he contextualizes such an angst, at least in part, through the figure of a fledgling comparatist, address an undeniable reality. As such, graduate students in our field struggle with shifting parameters of employability, charges of dilettantism and more importantly the seemingly never-ending task of defining and legitimizing the scopes of

our scholarship both within and beyond the discipline. Therefore, on at least that level, one can be in agreement with Bernheimer's assessment of the state of the discipline. Such a predicament is becoming increasingly shared across departments and centers of Comparative Literature in universities across the world to varying extents. As Chanda argues in "Can the Non-Western Comparatist Speak?" responding to Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, were Comparative Literature to "die" in a place like India, it would not be from some "grand epistemological collapse," but rather from "malnutrition" (Chanda, "Can the Non-Western…" 59). It was not too terribly long ago that comparatists across boundaries of age, location and tenure, were simultaneously outraged and humbled by the University of Toronto's proposal to shut down their Centre for Comparative Literature. Both the outrage and the feeling of humility in my opinion stem from the same place, the very same logic on which Greek tragedy seemingly operates. The centre at Toronto was founded by the efforts of stalwart scholar and comparatist Northrop Frye. To see how paltry his legacy seemed, when held up against the overwhelmingly vast network of economic interests within which the education industry functions, of which the university system is a functionary, was without a doubt frustrating and infuriating, but also most certainly humbling and disillusioning. Unlike Greek tragedy, however, we are not purged of our anxieties as comparatists, as evidenced by the sheer volume of navel gazing such notions of "anxieties" and "crises" have prompted within the discourse of our discipline. I do not mean to be disrespectful of the histories and legacies of our discipline. I do, however, use the phrase "navel gazing" with some of its pejorative bile, because there are times when this reveling in a sense crisis becomes facile and somewhat debilitating. But more importantly, to step outside of these circuital notions and ask: does this apparent inefficacy of a purgation from anxiety, tell us something about the practice of our discipline? Is there a productive way of thinking about this anxiety? Can crisis be thought of

as being potentially salubrious? And do anxieties necessitate crises and vice-versa? These are a few questions that I, as a fledgling comparatist myself, would like to keep within sight in the furtherance of this present study.

Therefore, when Bernheimer finds comfort in the dawn of an epoch of "multiculturalism," a context that in his estimation will allay the anxieties of the comparatist once and for all, by providing, "a field adequate to the questions that generated it," I am forced to say that such a solace may not be viable beyond his immediate context of the Euro-American humanities academy (Bernheimer 16). Returning to my earlier speculations on the export-value of such visions for the humanities similar to Said's, it would be absurd to ask a comparatist from a context like India to take comfort in "multiculturalism," given that as Chanda puts it: "When you live cheek by jowl with the other, sometimes within the same body, and when inclusion in any broad-based collectivity is necessary for political action to be meaningful, this seems almost a luxury" (Chanda, "Can the Non-Western…" 66). As we observed in her commentary on the history of the field in the interview with Sahapedia, Chanda makes it rather clear that the need for Comparative Literature in a context like India stems from the inherent plurality of languages, literatures and cultures embedded in the historical fabric of a space such as South Asia. Indian poet, writer, and comparatist, Nabaneeta Dev Sen makes a similar argument in her essay titled, "The Concept of Indian Literature: Today." Written a little over two decades after Bose's report in 1956, the essay bemoans the lack-lustre response Comparative Literature had continued to receive in the discussions of Indian-language literatures or *bhāśā* literatures, while also simultaneously chastising non-western comparatists for focusing on "western" practices of Comparative Literature (Dev Sen 98). Dev Sen's essay, first appearing in the 1978-79 issue of the *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* (*JJCL*), marks what I earlier described as a shift in the practice of

Comparative Literature in India. What we observed in Bose, was a looking outwards or a broadening of the academic literary horizon in post-independence India through an engagement with European modernities outside of the British-Anglophone context. In Dev Sen the gaze is turned inward to explore potential meaning for a methodological praxis such as Comparative Literature within the study of a diverse body of literatures and oratures contained within the Indian sub-continent. Borrowing from Remak's comment on Comparative Literature providing a "viable international perspective" in understanding national constructions of literature and culture, Dev Sen proposes an extension of such an approach to studying regional language literatures in India under a national and international lens (99).

The Indian constitution, as per the Eighth Schedule (pertaining to the recognition of official languages functioning under the recommendations of the Official Languages Commission established in 1955) amended in 2003, recognizes 22 official languages. There are at present, standing petitions to the Official Languages Commission of India from 39 different language groups demanding inclusion in the Eighth Schedule. Each of these languages have their own unique histories and repertoires of literary, oral and performative traditions. However, each of these literary, performative, and cultural traditions also share a long and sustained historical interaction with one another. Therefore, while the claim that a comparative methodology is the only meaningful way to study the literatures and cultures of India and greater South Asia is undeniably legitimate, the operationalization of such a methodological framework would look very different from the way it does in the United States or Europe.

The first hurdle in the path towards transposing a comparative methodology originating in Europe to the study of modern Indian *bhāśā* literatures that Dev Sen outlines in her essay, is the commonly held misconception of a structural similarity in the relation between the various *bhāśā*

literatures and cultures in India and the national literatures and cultures of Europe (100). A transposing based upon such an assumed parallelism is primarily unviable, because of the unique interculturality of Indian modernities, that she defines in terms of the simultaneous or contemporaneous cohabitation of multiple historical temporalities (101). Dev Sen writes:

> "In India we have 12 modern literatures no less than 500 years old and 6 aged over a thousand years. Where are we to place ourselves? What does 'today' mean in India? It is an incredible timespan within which the modern Indian consciousness functions. We live with the ancient, medieval and the ultra-modern all within the reach of one another. Value-wise, in an urban middle-class ordinary family, often the medium educated father belongs to the 19th century, the uneducated mother and the domestic help to the medieval world, and the Hollywood-educated son is a twenty-first century specimen. Amidst such contradictory forces all working at once, where the formidable time-lag is not of generations but of centuries, it may not seem easy to find a common denominator in literature. But what miracles can the ardent comparatist not achieve? Through fearless 'confrontations' and careful 'discriminations' we can reach our ultimate goal without necessarily becoming an 'overreacher'. Only 'the context of criticism' in this case must be interliterary as well as interdisciplinary" (101).

Hence, the concerns of Comparative Literature and the larger practice of the Humanities in India would perforce be very different, and even if multiculturalism—as professed by Bernheimer, were to be the answer to the problems of the Indian comparatist, the approaches to comprehending such intercultural pluralities would follow a logic very different from that of the "hyphen." Constructions such as Bengali-Indian or Malayali-Indian, therefore, seem absolutely absurd to the Indian cultural consciousness, because as Dev Sen argues in her essay, the regional identity co-exists with the national as a subset and the two were not necessarily viewed as conflicting in any way, shape or form (99-100). Therefore, the borrowing of the logic of American multiculturalism lock, stock and barrel, as Swapan Majumdar argues in his critique of the growing "fad" of multicultural studies in India around the early 2000s, particularly in the social sciences, is problematic for a variety of reasons. Speaking as a practicing comparatist and a scholar of Indian and European literatures alike, Majumdar finds the redoing of Comparative Literature to make it

more “multicultural” as absurd as “whitewashing Makrana or Alabama marble” (Majumdar 140). In his understanding Comparative Literature, since its inception as an attempt to study literature across the boundaries of nation and/or language, has of necessity been an intercultural endeavour (140). Majumdar further goes on to differentiate between what he describes as “natural” and “forced” multiculturalisms (142). The latter for Majumdar has to do with how multiculturalism is reconfigured within a discourse of globalization (142). Multiculturalism in its present avatar, argues Majumdar, is no more than a diversity management strategy that functions to serve the interests of global and multinational capital (142). A parallel can be seen in Figueira’s use of Stanley Fish’s distinction between “boutique multiculturalism” and “strong multiculturalism” in delineating the conceptual incoherence of institutional multiculturalism in *Otherwise Occupied* (Figueira 22). Neither multiculturalisms truly address the issue of difference, though their failures are, as she states, “asymmetrical” (22). While the former preaches tolerance on the most superficial level, the latter, in according “deep respect” to difference, not only serves a universalist humanism, but in refusing to actually dialogue with difference inevitably ends up suppressing it (23).

Therefore, one could conclusively argue that, the dawn of multiculturalism, national or otherwise, does not seem to be the panacea Bernheimer envisioned it to be, especially if he was grounding his thesis in the institution of American Multiculturalism, as I am inclined to believe was the case, given his location and grounding in American academe. If one is to return to Remak’s definition of Comparative Literature or Wellek’s concerns for the field and its practice, it becomes evident that the discipline, historically speaking, has had little use or regard for the machinations of the nation and the constructs of nationhood. To reiterate Majumdar’s thesis, Comparative Literature is perforce and naturally multicultural in its ability to negotiate pluralities (Majumdar 140-141). Pluralities and dialoging across pluralities, I should think, is nothing new for the

comparatist. It might be, as Majumdar states, radically alien for those who have spent their academic lives and careers in the service of monolingual and monoliterary studies of national literatures, or for those who seek to retool themselves in order to assert their relevance in the dawn of a new epoch of the plural (141). Therefore, I am really not overstating my faith in the comparative method, when I say that comparatists have always been keenly aware of pluralities (141). Comparative Literature is an intercultural praxis, because from its inception it strove to work beyond the narrow confines of the categories of nation, language and the hegemonic discourses of high vs. low culture. The impulse to study literary phenomena across the boundaries of national languages and cultures is, therefore, foundational to the practice of this discipline. As Claudio Guillén states at the beginning of *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, we as comparatists operate on the level of the "supranational" rather than the international (Guillén 3). He prefers the "supranational" over the more commonly used international, because according to him "the point of departure" represented by Comparative Literature as a discipline is realized neither "in national literatures, nor in the interrelations between them" (3). This is predicated on the fact that, for Guillén at least, the practice of the discipline is not defined by the positionality of the inquirer alone (3). We shall return to Guillén's definition of Comparative Literature in terms of the "supranational" and his thoughts on the "Local" and the "Universal" at a later point. Presently I am interested in returning to, what I called at the start of this study, the proverbial "Crisis" of Comparative Literature—borrowing of course from the title of René Wellek's 1959 essay.

The "crisis" that Wellek recognizes in the practice of Comparative Literature—one perhaps of lasting relevance, is the predicated along two axes, the first being the failure in defining a subject matter and the second a failure in delineating a specific methodology (Wellek, "The Crisis…"

162). These are questions one continues to negotiate *ad nauseam* in the study of Comparative Literature. As an undergraduate and even as a graduate student, almost all the material one reads on the state of the discipline seems to reiterate, in one form or another, the same age-old question: what is Comparative Literature? This presents an odd predicament for a student in the discipline. Tell the average person that you are majoring Comparative Literature and there is very high chance of being asked—what's that? Or better still one gets asked the more infuriating question: So, what do you compare? To be fair, the latter is a question one gets asked even by practitioners of the discipline, especially by those to whom Comparative Literature is tantamount to a comparison of national-language literature X with national-language literature Y. I remember, as an undergraduate student, dreading being asked what I studied. For a greater part of my undergraduate years I simply replied, "literature," in the hopes that people would not make further inquiries, especially in a nation obsessed with the mass production doctors, engineers and chartered accountants. I used to be envious of my friends in national language literature programs. They could say they studied English literature, German Literature, Hindi literature or Tamil literature, and that would be that. They would also be similarly dismissed as dilettantes, however, they escaped the added curiosity vis-à-vis the specific nature of their socio-economically unproductive educational training. The few years in graduate school usually equips one with enough jargon to confound the average inquirer, however being asked to define one's discipline, while the discipline itself seems to be suffering from a chronic onto-existential crisis, is a difficult predicament to inhabit.

Inhabiting such a predicament has become even more challenging for the comparatist operating in a post-Spivakian universe. There are times when it seems that Comparative Literature is, if you would, a fugitive discipline; on the run, perhaps even with a bounty on its head. There

have been various attempts made to reconfigure Comparative Literature into one thing or another, each attempt at reconfiguration claiming the decay or the death of this discipline. Before moving to Spivak, I would like to explore a similar proclamation of the discipline's death preceding that of Spivak's. Susan Bassnett starts the concluding chapter of her book, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, by stating: "The opening chapters of this book suggest that the term 'comparative literature' has declined in significance in recent years, although it has also been argued that comparative practice is alive and well and thriving under other nomenclature" (Bassnett 138). She starts building towards the defining of such a decline at the close of the very first chapter of this book, wherein she attempts to present a history of the discipline. Bassnett concludes here by invoking René Wellek and Harry Levin, who according to her, call for a revisioning of the discipline and the abandonment of ossified modes of thinking (30). She concludes her next chapter, wherein she explores the history and practice of Comparative Literature "Beyond the Frontiers of Europe," by which she means the "American School," by truly ringing the death-knell on the discipline in stating that, "Comparative Literature, today, was in one sense dead" (46). Yet again, the sense in which she interprets such a death, is the demise of older modes of thinking of national literatures in comparative terms (47). In doing so, she also posits the future of comparative literary studies beyond the confines of Euro-American and Western cultural models and in negotiating, "the politicized world," of the present day (47). This possibility in part is realized for Bassnett in what she defines under "Comparative Identities in the Post-Colonial World" (71). Positing the African context in writers and thinkers such as Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Chidi Amuta and Wole Soyinka, she argues that such contexts require a comparative framework in the study of literature (74). However, she also seems to lump all three writers under the singular construction of African literature. Bassnett seems to predicate the need for a comparative approach

in the shared colonial experience of the African context and the subsequent marginalization of African literature and culture (again both singular) through the discourses of colonization and colonial structures of literacy and education (73). However, she does not for once consider the need for comparative approaches in a context of the pluralities of languages, literatures and cultures within continental Africa. Bassnett, in the remainder of this study continues to make similar claims vis-à-vis the study of Native American Literature and Chicano Literature, both again articulated in the singular, and the need for a comparative approach in both these contexts, however, this need for comparison is articulated only in terms of the post-coloniality of these cultures and not their internal diversities. The call for comparison here, seems to be configured in the colonially mediated confrontation between these cultures, that are homogeneously envisioned, and Western cultures, and the "hegemonic nature" of this cultural contact predicated, of course, on the "colonial enterprise." The fact that the center for such a configuration is still located in the West is further corroborated in Bassnett's inquiry into the fate of the "European comparatists," in light of the questions raised by, for example, "African comparatists" (75). The note on which she ends this chapter irrefutably confirms the locationality of what she concludes by defining as "Post-colonial Comparative Literature:"

> "Post- colonial comparative literature is also a voyage of discovery, only this time, instead of the European setting off in search of riches and new lands to conquer, equipped with maps and charts to aid him, this voyage is one towards self-awareness, towards recognition of responsibility, guilt, complicity and collusion in the creation of the labyrinthine world of contemporary writing" (90).

I selectively paraphrase, Chanda's response to Spivak's estimation of the state of Comparative Literature in the US here – if this is how Bassnett envisions the future Comparative Literature in the "Post-Colonial," as no more than Europeans from formerly colonizing nations coming to terms with the burden of the sins of their ancestors, the discipline might as well trot its way to an early

grave, or an early retirement at the very least. In positing the need for a revisionist approach to the discipline, is Bassnett not merely extending the shelf-life of the very Eurocentric approach that she critiques as the basis for the decaying and dying state of the discipline? Could one hypothesize that the folding of Comparative Literature into Translation Studies is in fact an avoidance of addressing the limitations of a Eurocentric focus in the practice of the discipline? This is an example of what I earlier called, an unproductive contemplation of "crisis," primarily because the resolution always seems to be sought outside of the discipline, instead of addressing the concerns within the discipline that generate such feelings of crisis and anxiety.

Bassnett's exclusive focus on Itamar Even Zohar's essay on translation theory largely ignores how Even Zohar himself views translation within the larger context of a systemic approach to the study of literature and culture. A view that becomes apparent in essays such as, "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem." Here Even Zohar posits translated works as working between the systems of source and target literary cultures, and in the fact that such a body of literary works is not limited to functioning on the linguistic level alone, but also reveals crucial aspects of the receiving culture in the logic of their selection (Even Zohar 241). He also poses the possibility of translated literatures or literatures of translation possessing "a repertoire" of their own within a literary culture (241). Now, in positing an autonomy of repertoire, Even Zohar is not positing an autonomy for translated works as a system in and of themselves, but rather a systemic view of literary cultures, wherein translated texts actively participate in a larger Literary Polysystem, regardless of whether they are held to be peripheral or central to the constituting of the polysystem itself (242,244). Therefore, contending the autonomy of Translation Studies based on a narrow reading of Even-Zohar's postulations on translated literatures seems theoretically unsound. I do not wish to contest or undermine Bassnett's postulation regarding the disciplinary

sovereignty of Translation Studies. What I do, however, take exception to are her concluding remarks in this book:

> "Comparative literature as a discipline has had its day. Cross-cultural work in women's studies, in post-colonial studies, in cultural studies has changed the face of literary studies in generally. We should look upon translation studies as the principal discipline from now on, with comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary area" (161).

Has had its day where? How has the cross-cultural work in the disciplines she lists changed the way one approaches a study of literature? I find the same lack of qualifiers here, as I did in Bernheimer's formulations of anxiety, troubling. Bassnett, however, does amend her position in relation to the death of Comparative Literature later, in responding to Spivak's proclamation of the same. In the fourth edition of her book *Translation Studies*, appearing out of Routledge in 2014, Bassnett admits, significant changes had occurred in the perception of translation since her book first appeared in 1980 (Bassnett *Translation* 146). She states that in the 1980s, Comparative Literature, a field of interdisciplinary study that should have accorded centrality to the study of translation and instead chose to marginalize fields like Translation Studies, Postcolonial Studies and Gender Studies, seemed to be in a crisis (146). So, as we see, even for Bassnett, the first to have prophesized the death of the discipline, Comparative Literature was no longer dead, it was merely in a state of crisis. She also makes mention of Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, and how responses to Spivak's work were making significant changes in the envisioning of the field (147). I cannot help but wonder if this seemingly sudden recanting of Bassnett's own prophesy of Comparative Literature having "has its day," had much to do with the University of Warwick closing its Center for Translation and Comparative Cultural Studies and her own following reappointment in Comparative Literature? I do not wish to be mean-spirited, but it seems all too easy to play oracle and prophesize the deaths and rebirths of disciplines when one has the security

of tenured professorship at a major international university. The aftershocks, however, are sustained by fledgling practitioners and graduate students who are left to negotiate the fear and trembling of a future of uncertain employability, like the protagonist of Bernheimer's earlier cited reverie.

However, what is more importantly lacking in Bassnett's estimation of the field, is the failure to address both of the axes identified in Wellek's essay as part of the crisis of Comparative Literature as an academic practice. In arguing, albeit somewhat accurately, the opportunities of engagement missed by comparatists over the years, Bassnett only addresses the question of what populates the comparatist's field of inquiry, or in other words the issues of what is read and where. The argument almost completely ignores the processes of textual hermeneutics, and we still seem far removed from reckoning with the questions of why we as comparatists read the way we do. In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak does seem to touch upon such issues, and tries to push the conversation in a more comprehensively contemplative direction, however even so, the discussion as stated earlier, like Said's arguments in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* seem to get overly embroiled in the questions of representation; of what is read, what is not, and by whom. Like Bernheimer and Bassnett, instead of focusing on the questions intrinsically germane to the praxis of Comparative Literature, Spivak seeks a possible renovation or rejuvenation of the discipline externally or extrinsically in an alliance with Area Studies and the Social Sciences. I use this both as a point of return to the ideas of crisis and anxiety in the practice of our discipline, and a possible move forward thereon. In analyzing Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* I draw in part upon Chanda's review article on *Death of a Discipline* in *Recherche Littéraire 39-40* responding to the claims in this book. Starting by envisioning Bernheimer's introduction to *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism,* in the light of a present-day version of "the Quarrels of the Ancients and the

Moderns," Spivak locates the three major disciplines she negotiates in this book, Area Studies, Comparative Literature and Post-Colonial Studies, in the context of three major historical process in United States (Spivak 2). She locates Area Studies within the Cold War context of US paranoia over "foreign threats." The rise of Comparative Literature in America is seen in the light of European intellectuals fleeing "totalitarian" regimes after World War II. While, lastly Post-Colonial Studies is contextualized in the immigration boom in 1970s America following the Lyndon Johnson immigration reforms of 1965. Based on these historical processes and their subsequent effects on scholarship, Spivak postulates: "Whatever our view of what we do, we are made by the forces of people moving about the world" (3).

Once again, a few locational questions remain unanswered. Movement from where, to where and under what circumstances? In the author's defense, however, the allusion to Lyndon Johnson does locate these historical trajectories and processes in post-Cold War America. The reforms under Johnson caused the immigration rate to the United States to double in just five years following their enactment. It is such a context that Spivak, perhaps seeks to map the forces of people moving about the world and the crisis of an American citizenry more ethnically diverse than ever before. Following this statement, Spivak invokes Claudio Guillén and her meeting with him (5). It seems only fitting, since that last statement could be read as an homage to Guillén's "supranational" vision of Comparative Literature, and no doubt a vindication Spivak's own "global" vision (5). I read Guillén's postulation of the "supranational" as a counter point to the seeming conflicts between the local and the universal. The idea of one's work being shaped by the forces of people moving about the world, offers a view of scholarship that lies most certainly beyond the national, but also beyond international relations. This becomes truer if one considers not just the physical movement of people, but the vast virtual networks of transactive relations that

exist in scholarship today. In this sense Guillén makes a move towards the global in moving away from the "international," for he views the international in terms of the interrelations between nations and thereby as still being grounded in ideas of nation and nationhood. One can discern in Guillén's notion of a supranational vision, a reiteration of Wellek's concerns regarding a reification of the nation and nationhood in a study of influences and receptions.

The revival of the discipline that Spivak envisions in the light of such a realization of scholarship being shaped by the forces of movements, is the somewhat uncomfortable marriage between Comparative Literature and Area Studies, a field dedicated to the study of the strategic Others necessitated by American anxieties regarding national sovereignty and security emerging out of the Cold War. One could rightly read into this move the same reservations discussed earlier in relation to Bernheimer's finding peace for the comparatist in "the dawn of the age of multiculturalism." However, Spivak does not propose this match without conditions. I am reminded here, of marriages being arranged; the concerned parent keen on ensuring a fitting match for their child. She does not seem amenable to just giving Comparative Literature's hand in marriage willy-nilly. Area Studies needs to first be deserving of this match, it needs to mend its ways and shape-up in order to be a worthy suitor. Following Volkman's proposals in the "Revitalizing" of Area Studies she moves towards proposing a new vision of Area Studies that would constitute such a mutually enriching marriage between the two disciplines (3). She proceeds to delineate the merits of this match by establishing the common ground shared by the two disciplines, they both in their own ways deal with the "foreign" (8). Building on such a common ground, Spivak articulates the potential this union poses in the overhauling of ossified models governed by old imperialistic worldviews and the work the two could do together in fostering

scholarship not only on literatures of the "global South," but also in the literatures of countless vanishing indigenous languages.

The logic Spivak proposes for this marriage between the two disciplines seems, in the final analysis, no different from the one Mrs. Bennet follows in finding matches for her five spinster daughters. As Chanda states, Spivak does acknowledge the unique skills a training in Comparative Literature affords to its practitioner, "attention to language and metaphor" and the capacity for "close reading" (Chanda, "Can the Non-Western…" 64). However, Spivak also suggests that Area Studies brings to the table a facility of and in language learning, that will only enrich the practice of Comparative Literature (Spivak 7-8). As a comparatist in training this did strike me as odd at first. There are two possible problems Spivak might be alluding to, the first being that the languages of the old Eurocentric Comparative Literature are not the languages of "critical defense" importance, the second one might surmise refers to the relaxation of language requirements we have witnessed in the past years by graduate programs in Comparative Literature. Therefore, perhaps the way Spivak envisions it, in this union between the two disciplines, the comparatists bring the skills of reading closely to the table, while Area Studies brings the languages and cultures of the Other, and possibly more lucrative options for government funding. In this sense, she is not wrong in admitting that there is truly nothing new about her "new Comparative Literature" and what she implies in "crossing borders" is merely continuing the comparatist's task of engaging the foreign, only this time with a different set of foreign others (16).

The latter ties into a possible criticism of the rising popularity of World Literature, particularly in the American humanities starting in the early 2000s and finding expression in works such as the David Damrosch's 2003 book, *What is World Literature?* published by Princeton University Press. In the book, he examines the question of World Literature along three principle

axes, namely circulation, translation and production. Damrosch uses the conversations between Goethe and Eckermann, wherein the doyen of Weimar Classicism had expounded on his ideas on *Weltliteratur*, to bookend his introduction to the book. However, Goethe's vision seems somewhat at cross-purposes with Damrosch's contextualizing the impetus for *Weltliterature* in "the dramatic acceleration of globalization" (Damrosch 4). The difference in the two manifests almost immediately in the invocation of Guillén's reading of Goethe's idea manifesting as the "sum total of all national literatures," which Damrosch in turn extends to mean "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (4). He sums up his endeavor in the following words:

> "My claim is that world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works at to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike. This book is intended to explore this mode of circulation and to clarify the ways in which works of world literature can be best read. It is important from the onset to realize that just as there has never been a single set canon of world literature, so too no single way of reading can be appropriate to all texts, or to any one text at all times" (5).

However, the conversation surrounding the status of "world literature" within what Said might call "Humanism's Sphere" has continued to be hotly contested. Damrosch himself admits this in a lecture titled: "What isn't World Literature," delivered in 2016 at the sixth meeting of Institute for World Literature at Harvard University. Here he addresses the major responses to and criticisms of his postulations and practices of world literature since the publication of *What is World Literature?* in 2003. He divides his responses in line with the three sources of criticisms he recognizes from within the scholarly academic community, namely national philologies or national literature scholarship, Comparative Literature departments and Postcolonial Studies. Most of these concerns align with reservations that are simultaneously my own and also to a large extent inherited through my training in a filed like Comparative Literature. All the concerns that

Damrosch lists such as, a lack of grounding in language and historio-cultural context, the seeming absence of a "theoretical" rigor and the lack of a political edge, are all legitimate concerns that he himself acknowledges need addressing. As Figueira has articulated on several occasions: "Is it possible to read the world through English translation?" However, what I concern myself with for the present, is the critique Damrosch identifies as coming from the comparatist cabal, which he describes as the "lack of theorization," invoking Heidegger, Derrida and other mainstays of poststructuralist criticism. Now, this can mean one of two things. Either we as comparatists have not been able to effectively articulate our criticisms of a sibling-field of study like World Literature, or the comparatist's critique of World Literature has been misunderstood. It is also equally possible that our critiques have been diffused and somewhat inconsistent, which is not uncommon for a widely pluralistic field such as Comparative Literature. Therefore, I would like to emphasize here that the problem is less of the absence of "theory" and rather one of a perceptible lack of methodological orientation in "World Literature," as it is envisioned in the American academy today. Also, equally important to stress is that our concerns as scholars of world literatures are markedly different from the study of World Literature. While I do think quibbling over something as minor as the use of the singular versus the plural might seem at first facetious, I do also believe that this very minor difference poses more serious ramifications in what sets the comparatist's work apart from World Literature as envisioned in particular by Damrosch.

To be entirely clear, despite my inherited reservations, I see nothing problematic in what Damrosch proposed in *What is World Literature?* or his more recent thoughts on the status of world literatures in the humanities academy today. He responds rather effectively to the charges levied against him by postcolonial theory, that views World Literature as no more than a "neo-liberal" and "neo-colonialist" enterprise that seeks to culturally colonize the world through the

imposition of a Euro-American hermeneutic lens. Postcolonial critics, Damrosch argues in his 2016 lecture, invoking the work of scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, accuse world literature of not being "political" enough, by which he says they mean not "left" enough. As a comparatist who is currently operating in an American academic context, while having also lived and trained in a "postcolonial," pluricultural and plurilingual context, I find the separation of these critiques based on their immediate sources odd. And I say this, because I would share the concern of all three groups Damrosch mentions in his talk, but of all concerns I find the lack of a methodological orientation most concerning. That being said, I am not inherently opposed to the idea of World Literature or as it manifests in our practices as comparatists, the literatures of the world. World literatures in our training as comparatists form in my estimation an essential pedagogical substratum for our practices and praxes. As Damrosch points out the obvious fact in his 2016 lecture, it is not humanly possible to learn all languages known to humankind. However, one also needs a reading base as diverse as possible as a precondition to becoming a comparatist. Reading texts in translation seems an easy solution, especially in the crafting of undergraduate and sometimes graduate curricula, especially in the interests of cultivating such a vast grounding in as many literary cultures as possible. As David McCutchion, former professor of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur, wrote defending the teaching of literatures in translation: while nothing would be better than reading a literary work in its original language, reading translated texts is a compromise that must be made in order to further the "international vision" of a field like Comparative Literature (McCutchion 21). However, the British-born Indian comparatist also stresses that while such an approach is permissible at the undergraduate level, graduate research cannot be carried out without access to texts in the original languages (22).

Therefore, one is not opposed to the praxis that David Damrosch is proposing in the fashioning of "World Literature" as a unique field of inquiry. The acknowledgement of plurality that Damrosch makes in his delineation of what "isn't" World Literature is refreshing. However, the constant use of words such as "claiming" and "reclaiming" do make me, an individual coming from a formerly colonized people, a bit uneasy. Firstly, whose world is it and in whose name is it being claimed or reclaimed? It is in such a site of uneasiness that I locate my criticism of the aforementioned use of the singular. If we are not, as Damrosch argues in his talk, pushing a "join-hands-and-sing-Kumbaya-one-world-one-family" universalist hegemonic humanism, then why configure the literary productions of the world in the singular? What does the "world" before "literature" in World Literature mean? Is it an adjectival qualifier? As in, when we say World Literature, to we mean a literature that is universally relevant across the world, or do we mean a literature that is defined by a "worldly" quality, that is as Said would describe it "in the world?" Or do we mean from such a construction that all literary production anywhere in the world is relevant in a "worldly" sense? The latter cannot be the case, because as we observe in the earlier cited passage from *What is World Literature?* Damrosch is concerned only with texts that travel across cultures either through translation or in their original languages. And while the acknowledgement that World Literature would look different in different parts of the world, does address the problem of a singularity or insularity of vision, what it does not address is the locationality of Damrosch's own envisioning of the "world." The use of quotation marks is far from being polemical, but rather an emphasis of the locationally constructed nature of any idea of worldliness. The problems of not acknowledging the locationality of one's "world" and the directionality of the literary transactions one is operating within become most apparent in Damrosch's more recent configurations of "Minor" and "Ultra-minor" literatures, presented at the

21st congress of the ICLA held at the University of Vienna in the Summer of 2016. The categorizations of "Minor" and "Ultra-Minor" are in the final analysis based on the earlier discussed logic of "circulation." As a prelude to his argument, Damrosch invokes an essay titled "Weltliteratur" wherein the Danish critic and scholar, Georg Brandes argues, that literatures written in French, German and English, and to a lesser degree Italian and Spanish were fated to be the literatures read universally by the most cultivated minds across the world, thereby making these the major canonical literatures of the world, while others written in languages such as Hungarian, Finnish, Swedish, Danish, etc. would invariably struggle for global acclaim. As Damrosch rightly points out, English, French and German incidentally happened to be the three principle languages Comparative Literature has operated in, what he does not stress though, is the fact that these were the principle languages of Comparative Literature in a Euro-American academic context. He segues then into his own collection of data upon which he bases a newer understanding for the "minority" and "ultra-minority" of certain literary figures and cultures. The data set Damrosch draws upon is the citation history of the MLA between the years 2006 and 2015. Based on the number of citations writers receive over the course of these years, they are categorized as "minor" or "ultra-minor." Three authors in particular caught my attention, Tagore who was bracketed as "lower major," and Premchand and Ghalib who occupied the lower ends of the canonicity curve in the "ultra-minor" spectrum. Needless to say, the Indian contingent in attendance at the lecture was quite distraught, especially the significant Bengali presence therein. The canonicity of Tagore in the Indian state of West Bengal borders, to say the very least, on being hegemonic. Every year the capital of the state, Kolkata, comes to a grinding halt on the birth anniversary of India's first literary Nobel laureate with celebrations commemorating the life and works of Bengal's very own poet-seer. This is not really a matter of a wounded national or nationalist pride for me per se. What

concerns me is how such a logic of circulation fails to acknowledge the almost Schrödingerian superposition that these writers inhabit within its schematic, simultaneously hegemonic or "major-canonical" within one locationality and "minor" or "ultra-minor" within another. The oddity of such a superposition becomes apparent equally in the cases of Ghalib and Premchand. Ghalib continues to be one of the foremost figures in the history of Urdu poetry and Urdu literature in general. As the poet himself remarks:

> یہ مسائلِ تصوّف یہ ترا بیان غالب
> تجھے ہم ولی سمجھتے جو نہ بادہ خوار ہوتا
> (*yih masāʾil-e taṣavvuf yih tirā bayān ġhālib*
> *tujhe ham valī samajhte jo nah bādah-ḳhvār hotā*)
> "Such heights of mysticism, in these your words so profound, Ghalib.
> We would surely have hailed you a saint, weren't you an incorrigible drunk!" (translation, mine)[8]

So great was his continuing impact that the modernists and progressives mentioned at the start of this part, often invoked and paid homage to him through incorporating excerpts from his poetry in their own or using lines from his poems as titles for their larger published works. For example, PWA member and arguably one of the foremost women Urdu prose writers, Ismat Chughtai, chose a line from Ghalib's poetry to be the title of her memoire: *"Kāgazi Hai Pairahan*" (translated as *The Paper Attire* by Noor Zaheer for Oxford University Press in 2016).

A plausible reason one could proffer for Ghalib's popularity amongst the "progressives," perhaps, has to do with his transitional position between the old and the new. Ghalib was arguably the last of the great Urdu court poets of India and saw in his lifetime the fall of the great Mughal empire to British colonization in northern India, and with it the decline of courtly culture, court

[8] https://www.rekhta.org/couplets/ye-masaail-e-tasavvuf-ye-tiraa-bayaan-gaalib-mirza-ghalib-couplets-1

patronage and the loss of his own livelihood. Ghalib was appointed to the court of Bahadur Shah Zafar II, the last Mughal emperor of India deposed shortly after the First War of Indian Independence in 1857. In one of his later poems Ghalib writes:

ہے اب اس معمورے میں قحطِ غمِ الفت اسد
ہم نے یہ مانا کہ دلی میں رہے کھاویں گے کیا
(“hai ab is maʿmūre meñ qaḥṭ-e ġham-e ulfat asad
ham ne yih mānā kih dillī meñ rahe khāveñge kyā”
“In this once thriving city, there is now even a dearth of afflicted lovers
I must now admit; were I to stay on in Delhi on what would I subsist?”[9]

Ghalib inhabited a period of transition between the precolonial and the colonial, while the “progressives” saw themselves as transitional between the colonial and the postcolonial. They most likely perceived in his work a kindred response to the flux of changing “world orders.” The point I wish to make here is simple, a shift in vantage point turns these categories of “minor” and “ultra-minor” on their heads. However, once again, I would like to equally emphasize that I am not opposed to the “world” discovering poets like Ghalib, and therefore I am not in disagreement with World Literature’s quest for the foreign. I would even go as far as acknowledging, that the same “world hunger” we spoke of earlier drives such a search for literatures hitherto unread. However, I do find the seeming insistence of assigning locationally unqualified categories to these literatures somewhat conceptually unsound. For example, were students in a World Literature class to read Ghalib or Tagore, would they come away with knowing more than the Euro-American context’s unfamiliarity with them? Would the scholarship of World Literature, configured as it is today, be able to bridge the difference in the reception of these poets in their source and target cultures?

[9] https://www.rekhta.org/couplets/hai-ab-is-maamuure-men-qaht-e-gam-e-ulfat-asad-mirza-ghalib-couplets

Such an approach would perhaps be a more positive reading of the prophesies of death as seen in Bassnett's and Spivak's works, or Damrosch's reclaiming of the "world" as a means to reinvigorate the study of literature in a Euro-American context. Such a reading is also one that I as a young comparatist can make my peace with. Given the position of my own proposed scholarship in the field, I see nothing wrong in wanting to displace the centrality of Euro-American pedagogies to practices of Comparative Literature with curricula that are more robustly inclusive of otherwise located literary cultures, but this would be entirely contingent on one's own "placing," to borrow from Prawer's terminology, in relation to one's practice of the discipline. I return here to the almost perennial notion of a crisis within the discipline and what such a state of anxiety could possibly mean for us as comparatists today. Both the crisis and the anxiety our discipline generates can be understood in terms of the two axes, returning to Wellek's postulations in "The Crisis of Comparative Literature." The first of these two axes is the defining of a scope for one's scholarship. Here is where I propose extending the definition Prawer provides for in the idea of "placing" with relation to practices of comparative studies, "the mutual illumination of several texts, or series of texts, considered side by side; the greater understanding we derive from juxtaposing a number of (frequently very different) works, authors and literary traditions" (Prawer 144). The extension of Prawer's comparativistic approach I propose would also include in its considerations, the locationality of the inquirer. The scope of one's scholarly endeavors and the comparisons one makes, are bound to be determined, at least in part, by one location and the locus of one's training. The question of a uniform field of inquiry for all comparatists alike is simply out of the question. Therefore, claiming a universal cannon – literary, theoretical or otherwise, for the training of the comparatist is absurd. I am not, however, arguing in favor of an entirely idiosyncratic approach of picking and choosing willy-nilly – a "build your own sandwich/pizza"

pedagogy if you will. If one can at all think of any shape or form of canonicity for anything, it would be the mandatory incorporation of a close study of the history of our discipline in the training of future comparatists. It is precisely for such reasons, that I find the ongoing fuss made about the immanent Eurocentrism of Comparative Literature absolutely ludicrous. Anybody who has any knowledge of the discipline's history will know of its origins in Europe. What else could a discipline born out of processes within the histories of Europe be, other than Eurocentric? This historical fact of the origins of the discipline does not, however, necessitate its continued Eurocentricity. As a practitioner of the discipline trained outside of a Euro-American context, I have had to negotiate the very same Eurocentric biases that Bassnett, Bernheimer, Damrosch, and Spivak all hail as severely detrimental and crippling to the future of the discipline. And yet, the discipline itself continues to fight for its place in the academy and for the most part, at least functionally, holds its own! It is precisely in such a survival that I posit the play of locationality. As scholars in the discipline, the only way in which we can define the scopes of our fields of inquiry, is by "placing" ourselves in relation to the historical and methodological processes of the discipline.

This brings me to the second axis identified from Wellek's essay, that of method or methodology, something I see almost entirely under-discussed in all the criticisms of the field/discipline we have encountered thus far. Regarding the question of methodology, however, I am inclined to be slightly more unyielding. First and foremost, Comparative Literature is the study of literature. I do not see any possible compromise in regard to the primacy of the literary or literariness and its study to the practice of this discipline. Therefore, when Bassnett accuses Comparative Literature of not according centrality to disciplines like "Post-colonial Studies" or "Gender Studies," I am not particularly sympathetically inclined. I am not opposed to the

extending of approaches we use to read literary texts being applied to other forms of cultural expression or production. However, how can one arrive at such an extension without a grounding first in the methods of literary reading? I would perhaps be more inclined to the case that Bassnett makes for Translation Studies, but only in the extent to which the study of translation informs a larger pedagogoical context for literary scholarship within a comparative framework. As comparatists, we do admit to and defend teaching literatures in and through translation. In all the definitions of the discipline we have encountered, the focus is unequivocally on the literary. In Guillén it is the study of literature in its supranational assemblages, not the study of the supranational assemblages in and of themselves, as would ideally be the case in, for example, Post-colonial Studies. Remak posits the study of literature in relation to other spheres of human expression and other disciplines. Literature, as it is, stems from the various diverse spheres of human experience, and therefore calls for a plurality of perspectives and approaches in reading. There are other disciplines founded along identitarian lines such as Gender Studies, Ethnic Studies, LGBTQI Studies or its previous avatar Queer Studies, that are devoted to the study of configurations, representations and experiences of identities in social, historical, political, cultural and even economic contexts. These are disciplines Comparative Literature has and continues to dialogue with by virtue of being interdisciplinary in nature, and much has been gained, as always, for the comparatist in negotiating and engaging such alterities, regardless of whether one inhabits them or not. Therefore, when comparatists are accused of ignoring such or other marginalities, I do not always see the fault as lying with the practice, but rather with the practitioner.

Therefore, on the issue of a crisis in method, I side wholly with Chanda, based perhaps on the shared location and locus of our training:

> "The strength of the unglamorous conglomerate of comparative methodological tools, namely thematology, historiography, genology and the relations of contact, is that they enable us to discern the repertories of questions posed and answered by texts produced and received in particular historical conjunctures" (Chanda 63).

I have called myself a young practitioner in training, and therefore my stances might seem unusually rigid, but it becomes important to stress here that I did not come to Comparative Literature from elsewhere, I was raised in it. Growing up in five languages and literary cultures, and around several more, Comparative Literature became a natural scholastic home for my experiential reality. Therefore, I am in agreement with Figueira when she says that one comes to Comparative Literature, because one lives a comparative life. Several scholars in our field, as we see in the poignantly plurivocal memoir of the discipline, *Building a Profession*, edited by Lionel Gossman and Mihai Spariosu, came to Comparative Literature from experience of living comparative lives. They found something in this discipline that was perhaps lacking in the fields they previously worked in. They found Comparative Literature freeing or liberating, facilitating for them opportunities to do the kind of work other narrow disciplinary confines would not allow. One such testimonial in particular stands out among the rest compiled in *Building a Profession*. In a piece titled: "How and Why I Became a Comparatist," Anna Balakian recounts her journey towards becoming a comparatist, starting with the fact of her birth in Constantinople shortly before it became Istanbul (Balakian 75). Having lived amidst "the sounds of many languages" in multicultural Turkey, Balakian describes her journey as an Armenian immigrant across Europe and the final settling of her family in New York City around the early 1930s, which she describes as a "polyglot" and "international" city (75). Struggling to master the English language and "passing for American," as several immigrant communities did, she recalls never being able to completely shed a sensibility that the plurilocationality of her childhood had imparted (76). Inspired by her love for the French language and its literature, she trained to become a French

teacher and later a professor of French literature following her doctoral studies. It was at this point in her career, as Balakian describes, with so much still to master in French literature, with a "weak German," no Spanish, an understanding of Italian that was mostly based on intuition and a "purely oral" knowledge of Armenian, she arrived at Comparative Literature (77). She wondered if she could call herself a comparatist, simply by virtue of having wandered all across Europe as the child of refugees (77). The experience she describes as her first foray into Comparative Literature, is poignantly evocative of the *re-naissance* of the discipline in the United States following the two World Wars.

> "So I bought a ticket and made a small financial investment that was to shape the rest of my life. I joined the American Comparative Literature group on the docks of New York City where we greeted the Europeans who had landed by ship. They were happy recipients of a Ford Foundation grant which had made it possible for them to join us on our way together to Chapel Hill, there to convene as a single group and organize the official International Literature Association" (78).

Balakian is, of course, speaking of the historical second ICLA congress and the first one in the United States in 1958, where Wellek had delivered his lecture on the "crisis" in the field. Following this event, Balakian describes her scholarly growth from a professor of French literature towards becoming a comparatist. Interestingly, some of her realizations resonate with those of the earlier mentioned second generation of Indian comparatists. For example, Balakian states that in 1970 her love for surrealism in French poetry led her to the "rich and deep impact" such a poetic aesthetic had had on Latin American and Caribbean poetry, thereby affording her not only a new perspective on a literary movement that she had worked on in her first book, but also an intercultural understanding of literary transactions across languages, nations and cultures (79). Her development as a comparatist also made her keenly aware and critical of scholarly trends gaining ground in her time. She particularly mentions the work of Aimé Césaire, regularly featured in her curricula and read within a context of literary transactions and the complex receptions of surrealist

aesthetics in Caribbean literatures, when authors such as Aimé Césaire, Nicanor Parra were increasingly being boxed-in within rubrics of postcolonial literatures (82). She rather presciently observes that Comparative Literature was headed towards a "struggle with political correctness" (87). In conclusion Balakian states:

> "In the face of formidable pressures to dehistoricize and dismember literature, I hope that Comparatists will maintain the intrinsic meaning of the discipline: to establish contacts, connections, and continuity and to be the frontliners in the coming struggle for the survival and expansion of literary scholarship" (87).

And true enough, as we have seen over the years, several scholars have used the inherent freedom afforded by a praxis like Comparative Literature as the basis to carve out niches separate from the discipline, and one cannot judge them too harshly for it. One does not ask that they pay constant obeisance to the discipline or even their dues. But as Chanda states, "The last thing we need at this point, and not in the least from a Chair in Comparative Literature, is a proclamation of redundancy" (59).

CHAPTER 5

National, Transnational and Supranational Humanisms: Literature and Engagements with "Radical Alterity"

In this concluding chapter of the first part of this work, I propose to examine the possibilities of national practices for Comparative Literature, and the complex and problematic burdens placed upon such a practice by global resurgences of nationalisms and nationalist political concerns. In the previous chapters, I presented a brief critical historiography for the growth of Comparative Literature as a scholarly field of inquiry within the Indian academy. As we observed from the arguments presented by Bose, Dev Sen and later Chanda, Comparative Literature in India emerged out of a very real need within processes of decolonization that were equally operational within intellectual and cultural life both within and outside of the academy, during the country's nascency as a sovereign nation. As Chanda, also emphasized, a practice of the discipline in India, in many ways, manifested responses to the historical forces that formed and shaped a context for it. As we observed, in the cases of scholars such as Dev Sen, Majumdar and Bandyopadhyay, an exposure to diverse European modernities through a training in the discipline, led them towards an exploration into the complex patterns of impact, influence and receptions such modernities had on the cultures they had formerly or were continuing to colonize. The progression was undoubtedly natural as such realities resonated more with our own complex contexts of colonial modernities and postcolonial postmodernities. What such a recognition also facilitated, was a more hospitable environment for a comparative study of modern Indian literatures and cultures, which for the most

part at the time were studies in isolation from one another in national language departments. Thus, began the gradual germination of a possibility for what scholars such as Amiya Dev would term Comparative Indian Literature. However, even Dev himself would agree that such a nomenclature demands further explication:

> "What kind of comparative literature is Comparative Indian Literature? Is it merely a branch of world comparative literature, or does it have a rationale of its own? Which variety is it, the French, American or Russian, or is it a new variety all together? Does it have a historical or an aesthetic bias, or both" (Dev 12)?

In the past, I had expressed my unquestioning support for such an "Indian" practice of Comparative Literature, and I still agree entirely with the claim Dev Sen makes in the essay I referenced in the previous chapters, that Comparative Literature offers the only viable methodology for any holistic approach to the study of literatures and cultures within contexts such as India, that are pluralistic in every sense. Such a fact notwithstanding, a question of biases – besides just those of a historical or aesthetic nature, that potentially underpin such a practice of the discipline when it is grounded in an idea of nationhoods or national cultures, has become of greater significance today. Here we are yet again faced with a complex and complicated crossroads, one where the local or locational is seemingly at odds with a potential for universality. Could one speak of a locational practice without thinking, for example, of the local as a microcosm of the global? Could one do so, especially in predicaments where the local seems to manifest symptoms of systemic and structural intolerances to alterity? Also, somewhat tangentially to such inquiries, can the "national" be truly "cosmopolitan?" There is so much one could say at this point, but I will exercise restraint and save such observations and possible inferences for later on in this chapter. I will, however, briefly explain one such recent example from India, that provides a clearer context for the argument I am attempting to make.

During a parliamentary session on November 20th 2019, the present Home Minister of India, Amit Shah, declared that the update of the National Citizen's Register (NRC), which until then was only applicable in the north eastern Indian state of Assam, would now be implemented nationwide. Such a nationwide implementation, Shah suggested would address, perhaps even redress, the problem posed by "illegal immigrants" on a nationwide scale. The context for the NRC, without getting into overwhelming detail, dates back to the first census taken in independent India in the year 1951. The taking of censuses in India had been first instituted during British rule under Lord Mayo in 1872, the then appointed viceroy of India, and have been conducted decennially since 1881. After India's independence from British rule in 1947, the Census Act of India was passed in 1948, and the first census in independent India was conducted in 1951. The act also provided for a National Citizen's Register that was to be updated following the census of 1951.

The unique position in the state of Assam, in the context of the NRC, is arguably owing to the historical porosity of the state's border with Bangladesh, and a long history of influx of immigrants and refugees from Bangladesh into Assam. The presence of Bangladeshi immigrants and refugees in the state of Assam, and the increased influx during the Bangladeshi Liberation Movement of the 1960s, has been a subject of severe internal conflict within the state for several years now. The Assam Movement of 1979-85 was a state-wide civil unrest against the presence and influx of Bangladeshi immigrants into Assam resulting in, after manifold casualties, the Indian government launching a search to identify and deport "illegal immigrants" from the state. The movement resulted in the signing of the Assam Accord of 1985, which sought to address not only immediate situation at hand, but also the long simmering feelings of discontentment among the Assamese peoples against the Indian government, that had further been exacerbated by the

activities of militant nationalist organizations such as the United Assam Liberation Front (ULFA) founded in 1979.

However, as all Indians familiar with this history know – especially those who have lived the majority of their lives in Assam, the matter did not end there. In 2006 an enquiry commission under Justice K.N. Saikia submitted a report to the Assam state government documenting the "Secret Killings" of ULFA members, their families and sympathizers. The report detailed a series of extra-judicial killings between 1998 and 2001, implicating the state government and police, alongside the Indian army, for their role in the same. The report was discredited and never made public, but several journalists and writers from the region have documented similar instances from the same time period in their works. In 2013 the Supreme Court of India, mandated an updating of the NRC for the state of Assam. More recently, the Indian government passed the Foreigners' (Tribunal) Amendment Order on the 30th of May 2019, providing for all Indian states and union territories the authority to constitute their own Foreigners' Tribunals for the detection, detention and eventual deportation of undocumented immigrants. Additionally, the Assam Government is in the process of constructing its first detention center for undocumented foreigners in the Goalpara district, one hundred and thirty-four kilometers west of the state's capital city of Guwahati. The construction of the center, already underway, is projected to cost four hundred and sixty million Rupees and will hold up to three thousand detainees. News sources suggest that the Assam government is requesting assiatance for the construction of ten more such facilities across the state.[10]

[10] https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/assam-seeks-10-more-detention-centres-to-hold-illegal-foreigners/story-fHtbCWAQQRWR0op8XM7QuM.html

Now I am not suggesting these are new issues in India. I have merely glossed over a very long and complex history that dates back to the early years of India's existence as a sovereign nation. However, what concerns me, at the present juncture in my nation's history, and a larger global context, are the uncanny resonances between the global and the local. As Arundhati Roy contextualizes such resonances in her recent Johnathan Schell Memorial Lecture,

> "While protest reverberates on the streets of Chile, Catalonia, Britain, France, Iraq, Lebanon, and Hong Kong, and a new generation rages against what has been done to their planet, I hope you will forgive me for speaking about a place where the street has been taken over by something quite different. There was a time when dissent was India's best export. But now, even as protest swells in the West, our great anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements for social and environmental justice—the marches against big dams, against the privatization and plunder of our rivers and forests, against mass displacement and the alienation of indigenous peoples' homelands—have largely fallen silent."[11]

Saying this may seem extremely naïve on my part, especially given my now nearly six-year long absence from my native land, an absence that even my closest friends and acquaintances are quick to emphasize, but one can perceive a palpable change, as Roy suggests, in an erstwhile culture of dissent within Indian public discourse. It is possibly a culture of fear engendered, as I have argued in previous chapters, on account of instances such as the assassination of Gauri Lankesh. Even so, if democratic criticism, as Said has argued, is no different from a form of participatory citizenship, then it cannot of necessity be the individual responsibility of a single or singular entity to bear. When one speaks of democratic criticism, or its previous iteration as secular criticism in Said's earlier work, as a form of participatory citizenship, one is per force speaking of a larger culture or cultural practice. Let us face facts, in the final analysis, depressing and disheartening as it may be, dialogue of any kind seems increasingly impossible, in any discursive culture today – especially if such discourses require an operating across distinctly different subject positions. As we had

[11] https://www.thenation.com/article/arundhati-roy-assam-modi/

observed in the arguments Butler presents at the start of *Precarious Life*, our worlds are rapidly beginning to close in on themselves. In theory, there is nothing wrong with a demand for an update of the National Citizen's Register. It is fairly straightforward, a sovereign nation has every right to define the scope and extent of its citizenry within constitutional bounds. However, it is the inscription of such a sovereignty upon the existences of certain collectivities, in a manner that denies them the most basic forms of human dignity and rights to asylum and protection, is what makes this whole operation most troubling. It is such a rhetoric of securing, defining and inscribing belongingness that resonates, even if such objectives are achieved at the cost of mass deracinations, I would argue on both a local and a global scale. Nationalist insularity, is now most paradoxically, a phenomenon and ideology that is globally shared. As global geo-political entities, we are increasingly and separately united in safeguarding our nationalistic insularities from the globally deracinated.

In this chapter, I would like to further explore the relations and resonances between the comparatist's sphere and a larger practice of the humanities, human issues that concern practitioners within such fields of inquiry and scholarship both at a global and local level. For example, could one think of some vital aspect within the comparatist's praxes and practices that can contribute productively to a contemplation of what Said calls "Humanism's Sphere?" Returning to the earlier proposed parallel between Said's work in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* and Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," what does a practice of humanism mean today? Or as Heidegger iterates using Jean Beaufret's question, in response to which he wrires the piece: "*Comment redonner un sens au mot 'Humanisme'*" (Heidegger, "Letter" 195)? The sense that the asking of such a question can convey, as Heidegger argues, is polysemic. On one level, it suggests the assumption that the word has somehow lost or been divested of meaning, hence one is

interrogating the possibilities of a "restoring" of meaning (224). Such restorative actions could certainly pose multiple implications within discourses of humanism. Heidegger would argue that the posing of such a question does not necessarily point to the end of meaning, or even a renegotiating of meaning, but rather a desire to retain an original meaning. In the passages that follow he contextualizes, through allusion, the origins of the sense in which the word has come to be used to signify a rediscovery of "Classical Antiquity" in the early Italian Renaissance, where the word "*humanitas*" in Latin or "*umanisti*" in Italian gained currency in the works of Renaissance thinkers and artists alike (201). He ties all post-Renaissance understandings of the term in European cultures to the Roman idea of "*humanitas*" (201). "*Humanitas*," in Heidegger's explanation, was in fact what the Romans equated with the Greek notion of "*paideia*;" an education or training that embodied Roman "*virtus*," a quality that separated *homo humanus* from *homo barbarus* (200). In the final analysis though, the *humanitas* of the Roman civilization sought to define not the *homo humanus* in general, but rather the *homo romanus*, and therefore Renaissance thought of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy was, as Heidegger argues, essentially a "*renascentia romanitatis*" (201). And while the focus shifts in Christianity from "*virtus*" to contemplation of the "essence" of man in relationship with God, Heidegger argues that Christianity was no more or less metaphysical than other forms of "humanism" that preceded it (202).

Through such an invoking of "metaphysics," what Heidegger actually seeks to interrogate is the question of ontology. Ontology, as a contemplative realm of inquiry, for Heidegger is a metaphysics of (and for) the existence of "beings in their Being" (202). However, metaphysics for him does not reveal the truth about Being or the essence of man, quite contrarily looking for the "truth" or "essence" in metaphysics only impedes its understanding (203-204).

> "Metaphysics closes itself to the simple essential fact that man essentially only occurs in his essence, where he is claimed by Being. Only from that claim 'has' he found that wherein his essence dwells. Only from this dwelling 'has' he 'language' as the home that preserves the ecstatic for his essence. Such a standing in the lightening of Being I call the ek-sistence of man. This was of Being is proper only to man. Ek-sistence so understood is not only the ground of the possibility of reason, *ratio*, but is also that in which the essence of man preserves the source that determines him (203-204)"

Ultimately what Heidegger seeks to posit at the core of "ek-sistence" is thinking (213). Thinking, which is both an action and a quality that categorizes the "human condition," to borrow Hannah Arendt's coinage, is what "attends" to the relationship between *essentia* and *existentia* (213). Accordingly, such centrality usually accorded to "thinking" becomes both a critique of humanism and its ultimate defense, in Heidegger philosophy. The critique of humanism is rather, in this case, an unpacking of questions surrounding a restoring of "sense" to the word itself, which Heidegger argues is not possible without redefining it to negotiate a human condition or "ek-sistence" that is in turn defined in or by thinking. It is in such a concern over "ek-sistence," that I see both an alignment and a departure in the projects that Heidegger and Said undertake. And true enough, Said does tell his reader that he is not seeking to examine a historiography of humanism in terms of its "metaphysical relation to a prior Being," and is choosing to focus instead on a "usable praxis for intellectuals" that is connected to "the world they live in as citizens," one that also connects the principles of what they do and why they do it (Said 6). While I do not for once disagree with the proposed endeavor, I would also like to emphasize the fact that one cannot contemplate "being in the world" without simultaneously contemplating, "Being in the world." Returning to a comment Heidegger makes in his "Letter on Humanism:"

> "Before we can attempt to determine more precisely the relationship between 'ontology and 'ethics' we must ask what 'ontology' and 'ethics' themselves are. It becomes necessary to ponder whether what can be designated by both terms still remains near and proper to what is assigned to thinking, which as such has to think above all the truth of Being" (Heidegger 232).

The question then, is a fairly simple one. If we are indeed speaking of a praxis that is "usable" in the world we live in, what is such a praxis based upon. The questions of "what it means to be a humanist" and "what one does as a humanist," I would argue, are not only interrelated, but also inseparable. The larger question, however, in light of the constantly threatened existence of the humanities the world over is, what does one really expect from a practice of the humanities. As Heidegger explains throughout his "Letter on Humanism," speaking out against or criticizing the humanities or humanism is not necessarily a championing of the "inhuman" of the "inhumane." Whether one agrees with Heidegger or not, is entirely a separate question, however, what one is prompted to think upon the articulation of such a concern, is whether or not one uses "humanism" and "humane" interchangeably. And while Said, does point to the fallacy of such an erroneous metonymic interchangeability in its most egregious abuses, such as the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO being described as a "humanitarian" military intervention, it is not entirely evident from his critique if one must treat the everyday abuses of terms such as "humanistic" or "humanitarian" with the same severity (Said 7). Therefore, while it is clear that the use of these terms to describe atrocities such as ethnic cleansings and the military decimations of entire civilian populations is incontrovertibly unconscionable, it is not clear if an implicit conflation of the "humanistic" with the "humane" happens in an everyday practice of scholarhship within the humanities. Therefore, one might argue that there appears to be an implicit suggestion that the words "humanistic" or "humanism" indirectly designate the humane, especially when one inquires as to their continuing "serviceability" in an "inhumane and genocidal" world. Now, one is not arguing the absence of resonances between "Humanism's Sphere" and a broad notion of the humane, however, in pushing such resonances to the point of interchangeability, either consciously or unconsciously, we only set ourselves up – as humanists or otherwise, for failure.

One cannot measure the success or failure of any practice in academic or other forms of humanism against an inverse index of genocidal inhumanity in the worlds we inhabit. It simply will not work, and especially not in the case of academic humanism. However, the inquiry, if framed slightly differently, is perhaps of most value for the times we live in. What does it mean to practice humanism in a violent, inhumane and genocidal world? It is not a question of whether a practice of humanism is relevant or not within the worlds one inhabits, rather it is an inquiry into the potentials for relevance. How can practices of humanism be relevant in the worlds we inhabit? As stated at the end of the previous chapter, such an inquiry cannot begin with a proclamation of redundancies. As a student, scholar and teacher devoted to the study of literature, I could not claim redundancy for the study of any literary tradition, while also claiming that the written or spoken word possesses illocutionary power. What I could, however, justifiably argue is the inherently pluralistic nature of literariness, that literariness cannot be thought of in necessarily quantifiable or differential terms. I could, for example, argue the immediate synchronic relevance of a certain literary expression or set of literary expressions in a contemporary socio-political or cultural context, in other words I could argue its degrees of resonances with the concerns of an age in a specific time or place. Conversely one could also make the argument that a certain work or a collectivity of works ignore or are insensitive to the concerns of a group or groups marginal to the experience represented therein. Such arguments relate to intentionalities of production, circulation and reception, they do not speak to a work's literariness.

In such a sense, the path Spivak proposes to reinvigorate a practice of Comparative Literature in the US, in part at least resonates, with the arguments Said presents in relation to humanism as a usable practice in post 9/11 America. She does not suggest that Comparative Literature is an elitist and exclusivist field or discipline, rather she suggests that the discipline, in

keeping with its spirit of inclusivity, extend hospitality to "under-represented" alterities. In other words, quite simply, testing the usability or serviceability of the discipline's praxis when extended beyond its already defined realm of operation, namely Euro-American literatures and cultures. However, such an inclusivity is not based on what Tagore described as a "world-hunger," but rather on the more immediate exigencies of ever-expanding ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversities within Euro-American spaces. And therefore, to reiterate a point I have been seeking to make in a variety of different configurations, questions regarding the serviceability or usability of any given sets of practices and praxes within "Humanism's Sphere" warrants a two-part answer. The first of these two parts is functional and therefore usually locational, the second part answers more to a less tangible and codifiable, and perhaps more universal or potentially universalizable realm of praxis. If we return to the example of Buddhadeva Bose's defense of Comparative Literature's serviceability in the context of a nascently postcolonial Indian nation, what such a defense perhaps boils down to is a response to a "need of the hour;" which in Bose's case was the opening up of emerging Indian modernities to potential European literary and cultural influence beyond those of the immediately former colonizer. Facilitating access and exposure to European literary modernities otherwise than British and Anglophone American modernities was, in Bose's estimation, a possible move towards a literary and cultural decolonization. Skipping ahead, as Chanda suggests when the second generation of comparatists become scholars and teachers in the field, we see a move from an idea of Comparative Literature in India to the evolution of something called Comparative Indian Literature(s). As observed in the earlier-mentioned essay by Dev Sen, a new lexicon begins to emerge around the study of plurilingual literary and cultural expressions across the Subcontinent, that though received from Western/Euro-American practices of Comparative Literature, began addressing the specific practice of studying modern Indian

literatures relationally and comparatively. It is within such a context that I return to an understanding of the apparent tensions, that exist in the grounding of a practice of Comparative Literature and by extension the humanities within "national" concerns. Along with Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Swapan Majumdar, Sisir Kumar Das and Aiyappa Panikar, Amiya Dev was, as stated earlier, one of the strongest advocates for Comparative Indian Literature. From the questions he poses in his essay 'Comparative Indian Literature', one becomes keenly aware of the seeming anomaly such a nomenclature would pose, especially in contrast to Wellek's eloquent arguments against the focalizing of practices of Comparative Literature through national and more significantly through nationalist lenses.

Feeling a sense of belonging within such a context of Comparative Indian Literature, one might assume that what I am about to argue is a biased defense or apologia for the context of my own preliminary training. However, that is not the reason why I unequivocally agree with Dev Sen's earlier assertion that the only fruitful methodology for the study of Indian literatures is a comparative one, neither am I suggesting that such a methodological approach to the study of Indian language literatures is in the interests of literature and literary studies alone. Invoking Bose's sentiments in his 1959 report on the state of the discipline in India, I would argue that Comparative Literature, as a methodology and even a metaphysical praxis, could answer to a potentially very real need, even if such a need is centered around questions of "national culture." In Bose's context such questions pertained to a specific urban upper class (caste) western-educated cultural milieu, particularly the ways in which such a network of interrelations for receptions and influences circumscribed scholarly practices within a nascently postcolonial nation's academy. Concerns regarding the preponderant influence exercised by the literary culture of the former colonial master in the academy could, according to him be remedied by enriching Indian literary

modernities and scholarship through the study of non-British and non-Anglophone (Anglophile) modern European literatures. Whether in retrospect, such an approach could be deemed flawed or not, is immaterial. One cannot disagree upon the fact that it was such approaches adopted by Bose and his colleagues at the time, that gave Comparative Literature a disciplinary foothold in the Indian academy. The very concerns that originated in attempting to define a national culture would later, as observed in the works of second-generation Indian comparatists such as Dev Sen, Bandyopadhyay, etc., also facilitate critiques of an insular national culture. As historian Romila Thapar states in a recent essay, for her generation of scholars and thinkers who came of age in a newly independent India, the nation and all that it stood for – both as a physical geo-political entity and an ideational space, were a "given."

> "For Indians of my age who grew up on the cusp of Independence, nationalism was in the air we breathed. Nationalism was not something problematic. It was an identity with the nation and society. The identity and consciousness of being Indian did not initially need to be defined. We understood nationalism to be Indian nationalism and not Hindu or Muslim or any other kind of religious or other nationalism, and a clear distinction was made between nationalism and other loyalties. Nationalism could only be Indian. And Indian meant that which was above all smaller loyalties to religion, caste, ethnicity and region. Nationalism meant differentiating between the nation and the state, and it was clear that no government could take upon itself the rights of the nation. Sovereignty resides with the nation and not with the government. A nation referred to the people that inhabited a territory who saw themselves as an evolved community created by drawing upon the range of communities that existed prior to the nation. I was based on a shared history, interests and aspirations frequently expressed in a common culture that in turn drew from multiple cultures" (Thapar 3).

As she goes on to observe later on in the same piece, nationalism does not hold quite the same meaning in contemporary times. Especially in recent years, it has become increasingly sectarian and combative in nature, not in India alone but the world over, as opposed to the older formulations of secular and democratic inclusivity embodied in slogans such as "unity in diversity." One might attribute such a state of affairs in current times to a historically flawed approach that assumed

nation building could function as a trickle-down phenomenon. In India's now 72-year long history as a soverign, secular, socialist and democratic republic, there have been several interrogations of such notions of a trickle-down national identity, and even within such an ongoing and long standing context of debates and interrogations of national identity, in the last decade alone we have seen an unprecedented proliferation of totalitarian, exclusionary, conservative nationalist discourses and sentiments. As perhaps indicated by the national elections when India's citizenry reinstalled for a second term as Prime Minister, an individual who has in the past professed such views and hails from a political party that has had a checkered past of either overtly or covertly lending support discourses of religious fundamentalism and anti-secularism.

In the Indian context, one of many such watershed moments was the 1979 Mandal Commission or the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission (SEBC) and the responses it garnered. Instituted by Morarji Desai, India's fourth democratically elected Prime Minister, the SEBC was formed under the directorship of Bhindeshwari Prasad Mandal, to investigate the success and implementation rates for affirmative action provisions made for particularly caste and religious minorities, and economically underprivileged demographics within the Indian citizenry. In 1983 the commission presented its findings, revealing that a little over 52% of India's population could be labeled "backwards," which essentially meant that this 52% of the country's citizenry could not even access the most basic instruments for the furtherance of their social, economic and educational development. The commission therefore recommended implementing a "quota system" for the fixed allocation seats at state-funded institutions of higher education and reserving a percentage of jobs within government service for classes of peoples identified as "backwards" per the commission's criteria. When the measures recommended by the Mandal Commission were finally implemented a decade later by the then Prime Minister

Vishwanath Pratap Singh, there were widespread protests across the country. One of the more disturbing events related to this spate of anti-government protests was a series of self-immolations by college and university students across the country, starting with Rajiv Goswami, a student at the Deshbandhu College under Delhi University. As Ramchandra Guha notes in *India After Gandhi* of the nearly 200 students who attempted such self-immolation in protest against the government's proposed affirmative action policies, 62 succumbed to their burns (Guha 603-604).

Affirmative action policies have been hotly contested political issues the world over and have historically been as complex as they have been divisive. India has been no exception, and while the question of reserved quotas for historically marginalized groups within public education and service continue to be the source of much debate, what is of particular interest for me, especially in the history of the Mandal Commission protests, is the nature and location of such backlashes against affirmative action policies. A traditional marxist or socialist reading of these protests would argue that such backlashes are often prompted by the unease caused by challenges such forms of inclusivity pose to an established socio-economic order – quite simply a threat to an existing *status quo*. One might even go as far as to state that progress, controlled as it was in the case of nascently independent India by the urban western-educated upper (caste) classes, was defined in contrast with the antithetical marginalized and minoritized classes. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the principal architect of India's constitution and himself a Dalit, had long identified such disparities in India's socio-economic and cultural fabric and had made provisions for future policies of affirmative actions to be enacted in framing India's constitution. Article 16 in the Indian constitution opens with declaring "equality of opportunity" for all Indian citizens regardless of, "religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them," however also includes the clause: "Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any provision for the

reservation of appointments or posts in favor of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State."

Needless to say, there was nothing structurally unconstitutional within the Mandal Commission's recommendations. One would assume that there was nothing more nationalistic than upholding the constitution – very document that defines the sovereignty of nationhood. The question then turns to the location of discontentment surrounding the issue of affirmative action. Logically speaking, the then 52% of the country's population, whose interests such policies were designed to safeguard, could not be the source of such discontentment, and therefore the discontentment that one is speaking of in this case must have to have been generated within the 48% who had not been identified as "backward." I realize the inherent oversimplification in the analysis I am proffering here. However, it is only through such a seeming oversimplification that I can arrive at the fundamental values at stake in my present inquiry – the current state and possible future of something Said identifies as a correlative between democratic criticism and humanism. I would argue that democratic criticism is founded in the very spirit of democracy, not necessarily as a form of institutional governmentality, but rather as a form of interpersonal relationality. James Baldwin, when speaking of the Civil Rights Movement in the US delivered at Berkeley on January 15 1979, referred to the movement as America's "latest Slave Rebellion," repeatedly emphasizing that if one is put in a position wherein one has to fight for one's civil rights, then one is not a citizen in the truest sense.[12] Such a statement is evocative of W.E.B Du Bois' observations about the Reconstruction of the southern American states following the end of the Civil War. Explaining the position of Black people outside of slavery in America, he asks: "How does it feel to be a problem" (Du Bois 6)? The question in the case of the American Reconstruction, was regarding the status of

[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQejcZc4uFM

black people in American society outside of an institution that defined and circumscribed their presence on the country's soil for over a century. This was not a question that American constitutional democracy had been prepared to answer. This was not a question that could be legislated away, as the long history of racial conflicts have come to indicate. The long historical processes underlying such questions speak to not only the nature of constitutional democracy, but also to the larger questions of equity in and equality before the law.

The second instance that I would like to allude to in such a context of ongoing interrogations of India's sovereignty as a socialist secular democratic republic, was the controversial legislation enacted in 1986 by the Indian government in response to the Indian Supreme Court's 1985 judgement on the case of Mohmad Ahmad Khan vs. Shah Bano Begum. The premise of the case was seemingly straight forward. Shah Bano was a 62-year-old mother of five, who had been divorced by her husband in 1978. Under the then recently enacted reforms within the Code of Criminal Procedure in 1973, Section 125 of the code outlined a divorced woman's right to receive alimony and child support should her husband's means exceed her own. Following her divorce Shah Bano filed a criminal suit in the Supreme Court of India demanding her lawfully held right to alimony and child support. The Supreme Court ruled in her favor upholding her right to receive financial support from her husband. However, in 1986 the Indian Parliament passed the Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Divorce Act that significantly diluted the efficacy of the Supreme Court's ruling in the Shah Bano case. The act ruled in concurrence with Islamic scriptural law, that defined *Iddah* or the period of waiting before a divorced woman could seek remarriage as three lunar cycles or roughly ninety days. The new act limited the period for which Muslim women could receive alimony from their divorced husbands to the *Iddah*. The act had been passed, as we now know, under pressure from protests and criticisms

that came from sections of Indian Muslim communities, furthered by the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, against the Supreme Court's ruling in the Shah Bano case. The judgement was seen as an encroachment upon Muslim Personal Law, pertaining primarily to domestic concerns that included matters of marriage and inheritance. The case itself, along with the Supreme Court judgement of 1985 and the 1986 act of Parliament, became the center of a larger debate on defining parameters for a Uniform Civil Code in India.

The concern, most citizens would agree is not regarding the desirability of a uniform code for civil law, but rather how such a system can be put into operation effectively, and in such a way so as to not infringe on the civil liberties guaranteed to the nation's citizenry by its constitution. As stated earlier, one could run down a never-ending list of events and analyses tied to issues such as the ones discussed thus far. Moreover, the present Indian government's race to address and redress all of the nation's historical crises offers, one might argue, little hope for the future. In the span of the past year alone, the Indian parliament passed and effected the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act of 2019 as a beginning to the restoration of peace in the Kashmir valley after decades of conflict, and the Indian Supreme Court passed its unanimous verdict on the distribution and allocation of the contested land in Ayodhya following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 by Hindu radicals who claimed the land to be the birth-site of the god Rama. The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act, for example, not only violates the initial Instrument of Accession of 1947 through which the former principality of Jammu and Kashmir acceded to the then newly formed Indian dominion, but also article 370 incorporated into the Indian constitution in 1954 that further defined the position held by the state of Jammu and Kashmir within the Republic of India. Article 370 provided for the state to have its own constitution, a state flag and autonomy over internal administration. Moreover, the article provided protection for permanent residents of the

state and the land, disallowing citizens from other Indian states from owning land in Jammu and Kashmir. Historically the Kashmir valley has been at the center of an international land conflict between China, India and Pakistan, and Article 370 along with its subsections had initially been enacted to protect the interests of people living in such a unique frontier zone. In 1958 the Indian government enacted the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) as a measure to maintain public order in states designated as "disturbed zones." In 1990, AFSPA was applied to Jammu and Kashmir considering a longstanding history of international military border conflicts with China and Pakistan, as a means to crack down on internal insurgent movements and gather intelligence on the operations of cross-border terrorist groups that were aiding internal insurgencies. The implementation of AFSPA has been widely criticized on account of the almost unbridled power that it conferred upon the Indian military forces in monitoring and regulating the internal affairs of the state. Which once again, skirted violating the established provisions for the statehood of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370. In recent years, the issue has been addressed in public and cultural discourse in a variety of different ways. In 2014, Vishal Bharadwaj's critically acclaimed adaptation of *Hamlet,* combined the major plotline from the Shakespearean tragedy with the setting of Basharat Peer's memoir of a life during the armed insurgency led by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) during the 1990s: *Curfewed Night: A Frontline Memoir of Life, Love and War in Kashmir*. The film portrays the varied ways in which the conflict between insurgent groups and the Indian military violently disrupted civilian lives in the valley. The narrative follows Haider's journey, the film's eponymous protagonist, a young student who returns to Srinagar from Aligar Muslim University to seek answers to his father's disappearance – a doctor who had performed an emergency appendectomy on the leader of a pro-separatist insurgent group. In doing so, the film sheds light on the civilian disappearances, knowledge of which became public at the

height of insurgent and militant activities in 1995. The film poignantly portrays how mourning women gathered outside military and government information centers with signs reading, "half-mother" or "half-widow," voicing a lack of closure to their tragedies. They suffered in interminable grief, in the absence of definitive knowledge on the status of their disappeared kin. In many senses, as several critics of the Indian government's treatment of the Kashmir crisis have stated, the state Jammu and Kashmir has historically, along with other frontier zones, stood as an exception to the norm within the Indian democratic system. The final iteration of such an exceptionality, many fear, is the Act of 2019 that revoked Jammu and Kashmir's statehood, reorganizing the region into two Union Territories, thereby bringing the region under direct control of the Indian government, and effectively rolling back all the autonomy accorded to the now former state by Article 370.

Knowledge of the ground realities in the Kashmir valley following the passing of the 2019 Reorganization Act, are somewhat shrouded in mystery. On one hand we hear statements from officials in the Indian government promising the return of peace and harmony in the valley. Simultaneously, we also hear reports on how many Kashmiri political leaders have been taken into custody and that a majority of former officials of the state government in Jammu and Kashmir have been put under house arrest since the passing of the new act. The region, as we have also recently learnt, has been placed on a media blackout since shortly after the implementation of plans drawn out in the Reorganization Act. The Supreme Court of India has been continuing to hear petitions agains the abrogation of Article 370 since the passing of the Reorganization Act in August of 2019. Moreover, as Arundhati Roy suggests in the her earlier cited lecture, the implications of the recent directive from the nationwide update of the NRC, and its implications for the nearly seven million Indian citizens residing in "disturbed zones" such as the Kashmir valley remain to be seen:

> "The Indian government's August 5, 2019, annexation of Kashmir has as much to do with the Indian government's urgency to secure access to the five rivers that run through the state of Jammu and Kashmir as it does with anything else. And the NRC, which will create a system of tiered citizenship in which some citizens have more rights than others, is also a preparation for a time when resources become scarce. Citizenship, as Hannah Arendt famously said, is the right to have rights."[13]

Such is, to present a cursory glance of the problems at hand, the crisis within any constructions of an Indian nationhood. It is within such a larger socio-political context that one might tie the two lines of interrogation followed through the course of this chapter. Firstly, what can a practice of humanism or the humanities mean, both globally and locally, in the present times that we inhabit. Secondly, within such a larger context of the present *Realpolitik*, what would it mean to ground any practice within the sphere of humanism, in a national context. Specifically, with regards to frameworks such as Comparative Indian Literature, is one then also called upon to address or interrogate the notions of a national culture? Would such clarifications be warranted in light of the progressive blurring of the lines between national and nationalist concerns? Also, how if at all do disciplines such as Comparative Indian Literature, alongside other nationally grounded practices within a humanities academy, respond as we have seen in a history of the field in India to needs of the present hour?

Any defense that can be made of such a framework, would at least in part have to adopt a historical approach, as we earlier observed in a historiography of Comparative Literature in the Indian academy. As an academic discipline and field of inquiry, one might argue, Comparative Literature is by its very methodological nature resistant to totalities and totalizations, be those of theory, scope, disciplinarity and even methodology. Historically speaking our praxes and practices as comparatists cannot be reconciled with nationalist imaginaries, as famously argued in Wellek's

[13] https://www.thenation.com/article/arundhati-roy-assam-modi/

1958 ICLA address. As Dev inquired in his book *Idea of Comparative Literature in India*, what exactly could Comparative Indian Literature be, was it to be a branch of world Comparative Literature or would it necessitate a rationale of its own. Should it have as Dev indicates, a rationale of its own, and what would constitute comprise such a rationale. Moreover, would such a rational be founded on categories of the national, which in the Indian context as comparatist Ayyappa Paniker suggests is far more complex than a question of terminology alone (Paniker 18). He suggests that any engagement with formulations of Comparative Indian Literature, would perforce have to contend with the complex "conceptual ambiguity" of "Indianness" as a literary and cultural category (18). Like Paniker, several proponents of a disciplinary practice for Comparative Indian Literature, around the same time would argue that the inherent plurality within an Indian nationhood and Indian literary cultures would have to be foundational to the envisioning of such a disciplinary practice. Added to extant linguistic and cultural pluralities, one would also need to account for a variety of plural experiences determined by location, class, caste, gender etc, and as we have seen in Dev Sen's insights on the complex nature of Indian modernities, we also negotiate the contemporaneous inhabiting of plural temporalities. In his three-volume history of Indian Literature, comparatist and literary historian Sisir Kumar Das, proposed a model for the study of such differential temporalities in the histories of modern Indian *bhāśā* literatures. In his historiographical model he divides *bhāśā* literatures into "prophane" and "metaphane" clusters (Das 44). The former representing language and literary cultures that were exposed earlier in India's colonial history to British and European cultures, and therefore were "modernized" earlier, while the latter represent temporally later points of colonial contact. Das would therefore argue that the specificities defining "modernity" in any *bhāśā* literature, would therefore in part be

determined by the specific historical points of colonially mediated contacts in a larger reception of European modernisms.

Such a model, in my understanding achieves two ends. Firstly, it reiterates Dev Sen's insights on the temporally plural and complex nature of South Asian modernities and modernisms. Secondly, it emphasizes a reception-based understanding of literary modernisms in Indian and South Asian literatures, languages and cultures, rather than foregrounding colonial impact and ruptures within colonized cultures. In a postcolonial context, such a framework reiterates a concern for the pluralities that underscore discourses of a unified nationhood. As Thapar emphasized in the essay referenced previously, the nationalist ethos that fueled the anti-imperialist struggle in India, in many ways demanded a unified front, and such a sense of unification later carried over into the process of defining a united sovereign nationhood after independence from British colonial rule. Ambedkar, the principal architect of independent India's constitution, was perhaps most aware of the pluralities within India's national identity, hence providing within his framing of India's constitution in particular for the constitutional protection of the interests of all minoritized communities within the country's citizenry.

From a literary and a cultural perspective, such dialectics play out in mottos such as "unity in diversity" or the famous Sahitya Akademi (the Indian national academy of letters founded in 1954 under the Indian Ministry for Culture) motto, "Indian literature is one though written in many languages." Nearly every Indian literary historian and scholar has in some way addressed the implications of such a motto. As cultural historian Iliyas Husain states, organizations such as the Sahitya Akademi and other national academies for the promotion of the arts in India, founded around the 1950s and 60s, all echoed a Nehruvian ethos of a united national identity, and promoted ideas of cultural unity across the varied regional diversities in India (Husain 1474). Such efforts

can be seen in the endeavors funded by the Akademi in its early years, its first major undertaking was the compiling of a *National Bibliography of Indian Literature*, this was followed by the compiling of a detailed directory recognizing living writers in Indian languages called the *Who's Who of Indian Writers* (1474). The Akademi would go on to fund projects such as *The Encyclopedia of Indian Literature* (1987) and multiple volumes on the history of Indian literature, the last and most significant of which was compiled in three volumes by Sisir Kumar Das, the first of which was published in 1991. While a majority of such projects were published in English, the Akademi has and continues to support the growth and development of literatures and cultural scholarship in a variety of Indian languages, and currently has grants, fellowships and annual prizes instituted for authors writing in twenty-four Indian languages including English. While the motto still remains, the Akademi too has had to recognize the plurality inherent within Indian *bhāśā* literatures and cultures.

As Das' historiography demonstrated, the literary cultures of India represent a complex and irreducible plurality, and as Chanda has argued in her response to Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, an engagement with diversity or plurality is a necessity in contexts such as India where one lives: "cheek by jowl with the other, sometimes within the same body, and when inclusion in any broad-based collectivity is necessary for political action to be meaningful…" (Chanda, "Can the Non-Western…" 66). Therefore, the notion of "Indianness" that might possibly or potentially be indicated within a practice of Comparative Indian Literature, as Paniker suggests is much more than just a matter of terminology, and the rationale that Dev interrogates in his definitions of the field, is far from a nationalist one. So much so that such a conversation regarding the implications of grounding a practice of Comparative Literature within a national context, has hardly seemed problematic until recently. Echoing Thapar's views one might argue that the idea of an Indian

nationhood, regardless of its functional efficacies, has always been an inclusive one. However, as she also emphasizes, the forms of narrow sectarian nationalistic fundamentalism that have been on the rise over the past decade did not just spontaneously and suddenly manifest. Such discourses have historically existed alongside the more liberal and inclusive discourses of nationhood (Thapar 12). The demand for a "Hindu Nation," and a consolidation and securing of the same at any cost, to state the obvious, is in no way a new one. Therefore, the average liberal-minded Indian who is horrified by masses of people carrying saffron banners chanting slogans such as, "*Musalmaan ka ek hi sthaan! Qabaristan ya Pakistan!*" (There is but one ground for the *Musalmaan*! The burial ground or Pakistan!), is just as historically unlearned as the views expressed by those who show flagrant disregard for India's pluralistic past and present.

The question for a humanist in the Indian academy, more pressing today than ever before, is regarding the cooptation of concerns otherwise considered to be national by dominant exclusionist nationalist discourses that increasingly borders on being totalitarian. Therefore, while as Indian comparatists working in or on Indian language literatures may have never considered the possibilities of being implicated in such discourses, however, given the currency and support that such forms of totalitarian nationalism seem to be gaining across vast sections of Indians living in India and the diasporas, it possibly behooves us to be more mindful of that which in our own works and scholarship could be potentially cooptable. In some cases, we perhaps even struggle, as Butler suggests, under forms of censorship and vigilance that not only pose threats to the "circulation" of our work, but also to our person.

I am not suggesting that such crises in practice and praxis are in any way unprecedented, however, their urgency is felt in varying degrees across time. If a practice of humanism, as Said suggests, is truly to be a form of participatory citizenship – on a national or global scale, then it

must contend with the structures that define a citizenry in the first place. Most immediately India is in the process of putting to effect its Citizenship Amendment Act, that effectively suggests a preferential granting of citizenship to non-Muslim refugees and undocumented immigrants fleeing religious persecution in neighboring territories. The bill first proposed in 2016 now specifically names Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, Parsi and Christians as potential protected groups to be granted expedited processing for citizenship, should they meet the criteria outlined by the proposed act. Now, the passing of such a bill, in and of itself is not unconstitutional, because India is constitutionally defined as a parliamentary democracy. However, instituting religious identity, albeit under arguably extenuating circumstances, as a possible criterion for the granting of citizenship goes against the very spirit of secularism that also constitutionally defines India's sovereign nationhood. It was heartening to see that close to a thousand scholars, mostly Indian or of Indian origin, from different parts of the world and across academic disciplines attached their names to a statement calling for the immediate withdrawal of the Citizenship Amendment Bill. The statement stresses that the bill is in direct contradiction with Article 14 of the Indian constitution that guarantees any person within Indian territory equality before the law and equal protection in the law. Moreover, the statement argues that the passing of such a bill would severely strain the pluralistic and secular fabric of the nation. [14]

Could one think of such an instance as what Said might have meant by "participatory citizenship" – the enactment of a usable praxis through which intellectuals and academics can "be in the world?" The matter, I would argue, is regrettably not quite as simple. Echoing Said's claims regarding the potential universality of his work in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, despite

[14] https://scroll.in/latest/946261/deeply-disturbing-over-900-scientists-scholars-call-for-immediate-withdrawal-of-citizenship-bill

its locationality, I might make the case that despite having focused so closely on issues pertaining to contemporary affairs in India, the core of what I am arguing here perhaps resonates globally. Whether in India or the US or in countries across Europe, speculating the cause for such a heightening of nationalist insecurities in the face of globally deracinated others externally, or practices (and practitioners) of dissent and democratic criticism internally, seems to be overwhelmingly futile. How does one understand, from one's subject position as an intellectual or academic – that can in many ways be both limited and limiting, the seeming incredulity of the sheer intangible numbers that have come to define a support and consensus for insular, exclusionary and totalitarian nationalist ideologies? The resonances are uncanny on a variety of levels. I recall watching the last presidential election in the US with a group of friends and colleagues – November 8th, 2016: "the day that changed everything" as one CNN report called it. [15] I also recall being on the phone with friends and family in India on May 26th, 2014, the day Narendra Modi of the BJP was elected to his first term as Prime Minister of India. The reactions were the same. Everybody I knew or spoke to was somewhere between shocked and horrified. Nobody seemed to know anybody who had voted for Modi and yet the BJP with Modi as its premier candidate was elected into government with a resounding majority. Nobody I knew or anybody they knew understood how our nation could have voted into the office of Prime Minister someone who's involvement with the horrific communal riots of 2002 in Gujarat, while he was chief minister of the state, still remained to be wholly determined.

Yet again, as Said pointed out in relation to the inhumane nature of the NATO's "humanitarian" intervention in bombing Yugoslavia, one cannot even begin to wrap one's head around rising instances of genocide, violence and the violation of what are often thought of as the

[15] https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/08/politics/inside-election-day-2016-as-it-happened/index.html

most basic human rights; often "in the name of" some identitarian collectivity. Invoking the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, Arjun Appadurai writes:

> "This latter even bracketed the 1990s as a decade of superviolence, a decade characterized by a steady growth in civil and civic warfare in many societies as a feature of everyday life. We now live in a world, articulated differently by states and by media in different national and regional contexts, in which fear often appears to be the source and ground for intensive campaigns of group violence, ranging from riots to extended pogroms" (Appadurai 1).

Over the course of his 2006 book, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, Appadurai repeatedly contrasts the rise of aggressive insularities within identitarian collectivities across the world and a rapidly growing globalization, therefore suggesting a possible correlative between the 1990s as an era of "high globalization" and equally a period, as he calls it of "superviolence" (2). The analysis Appadurai presents suggests on a larger scale, the projected threat that "small numbers" present to any majoritarian collective, which as he rightly points out, has been extant throughout human histories (7). Such lines between an "us" and a "them" have always existed to varying degrees across time and space, however when such boundaries are blurred especially, "across large spaces and big numbers," such a loss of clarity in divisions or separation, "produces new incentives for cultural purifications as more nations lose the illusion of national economic sovereignty or well-being" (7). Globalization as a force and phenomenon, Appadurai argues, "exacerbates" precisely such uncertainties in the separations between categories of selfhood and otherness (7). In other words, such a blurring of lines threatens the ontological assumptions of identitarian fixities that underpin the formation of collectivities grounded in identities of the Self. If we are to hark back to Spivak's comment about being made, and perhaps even unmade or undone, by the forces of people moving about the world, then it is these very forces of movement on a global scale that result in the kind of "social uncertainty" that fosters within collectivities of "large numbers" a foreboding over "growing inequality, loss of national

sovereignty, or threats to local security and livelihood" (7). Such a sense of foreboding in turn often spawns "spectacular violence" through mobilizations within such "large numbers" against "small numbers" whose presence interrogates the sovereignty and stability of majoritarian collectives.

Such is, perhaps, the nature of the beast. As Toni Morrison suggests in her 2016 Charles Elliot Norton Lectures, any collective selfhood benefits greatly from the creating and sustaining of an Other (Morrison, *The Origin* 19). It is upon such an Other or collectivities of alterity then that a collective selfhood is in effect inscribed. However, what interests me – in both Appadurai's and Morrison's comments, is the allusion to the fact that at the core of such often spectacularly violent contestations between identitarian collectivities lies what Emmanuel Levinas would describe in several of his writings as the "work of identity." Identity, as Levinas explains in works such as *Time and the Other*, is tied to the appearance of an amphibolous "I" (Levinas, *Time* 53). It is such an "I" that is at once both signifier and signified that is central to identity in an ontological sense, and the emergence of such an "I" is wherein one can trace the beginnings of a totality for any signification in an "I." It is also such a signification that is in turn totalized in ontology that forms the basis for any collectivity in identitarian terms, be they social, cultural, economic, political or even psychological. Once formed such a signification in totality – individual or collective, must be protected as distinct from the infinity, in contrast to which it is defined. In the case of collectivities of what Appadurai calls "large numbers," such as the entity of a nation state, such totalities manifest in the form of a collective sovereign "I." Whatever be the case, as Morrison suggests, any collective selfhood is largely sustained by the designating of an Other. Therefore, one might argue that the Other or collectivities of the otherwise than become, fetishistic signifiers for an infinity in contrast with which a collective selfhood is defined. Hence, the consolidation of

such a collective must first be inscribed upon such alterities and in turn must also be protected from them, as the Other signing both its own alterity and a larger infinity potentially threatens the ontological totality of any signification in the Self.

Alterity, especially if recognized as absolute, for all intents, points to the absolute absence of Self. However, it is also the radical separation of the Other from the Self, through its alterity, even if one is to ascribe such alterity as attribute, that gives the Other an entity. The anxiety of an encounter with the Other is not, one might argue, as much a matter of the Other attributed in its alterity, but rather the abjection felt by the Self in confrontation with infinity, or what Levinas would describe as "Otherwise than Being." One could for example discern echoes of such an anxiety in the preliminary definition Julia Kristeva provides for abjection in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*:

> "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself" (Kristeva 1).

However, the true horror of the abject, is not an impossibility for meaning, but rather the possibility of meaning that is either inaccessible to one or must be rendered inaccessible. As Kristeva states the abject is not an "ob-ject" in as far as it is not something that one can assign name or meaning to, the only quality shared by the two is, "that of being opposed to I" (1). Or as Levinas would argue, that while what defines the "Stranger" is that he is "completely other" in that he is not bound by my rules and therefore, "disturbs the being at home with oneself," the "Stranger" and I, despite having "no concept in common," "We are the same and the other" (Levinas, *Totality* 39).

Therefore, while it might be all too horrifying to contemplate the absence of Self, a recognition of entity and therefore potentially selfhood in such an absence is perhaps horror of a different order. One that the human condition seeks to avoid at all costs, an estrangement of the Self from itself that is in a certain sense inherent within such acts of recognition, especially in the Other attributed with radical alterity.

A sense of crisis within practices and praxes of humanism or the humanities, in possibly essential and potentially universal terms, manifests one might argue with feelings of abjection tied to such moments of recognition, wherein the human condition is forced to reckon with recognitions of selfhood in not only an other or collectivities of otherness, but in that which is designated as absolutely Other – the unhuman and the inhumane. It is the recognizing of the inhumane and the unhuman within oneself and one's collectivities of selfhood, that does not allow for considerations of an ethics towards another or the Other. Such a recognition also compels a subsequent recognition of that which one otherwise recognizes as beyond the capacities of the human condition, as potentially being constitutive of it – for example, a recognition of human capacities for spectacular acts of violence. As Morrison argues the sustaining of collectives of selfhoods implicitly demands the creation and sustaining of an Other, part of the horror I am speaking of is confronting one's own complicity in the violence of othering. Or as Butler would argue in *Frames of War*, the history of human civilization is one of selective redistributions of relative precarities, as in the securing of collectivities of the Self more often than not comes at the cost of making those of the Other less secure, because such acts of securing often find, as Appadurai has argued, a mobilization in violence (Butler, *Frames* 3). In order to violate, one has to first de-entity the Other. Therefore, while acts of violence may truly seem spectacular, but the preparation for enacting violence comes first in form of rationalizations for violation, and it is perhaps irrelevant whether

such a rationalization happens before or after the fact. However, I am less concerned with the rationalization of violence and violation, what concerns me more is a disassociation that often runs parallel to such rationalizations. Our righteous outrage as intellectuals and academics – democratically and liberally minded, might draw attention to the spectacular nature of acts of violence, however, they also other such acts from the human condition and therefore potentially alienate them from a grounding in human agency. Calling violence "spectacular" achieves no more than confering such acts, be they individual and isolated or systemic, sustained or pogromatic, with exceptionality. When in truth there is nothing exceptional about violence and violation. To varying extents violence and violation are universal facts of everyday existence. Conferring upon such everyday realities an exceptionality only creates yet another from of radical alterity that is designated in order to consolidate and sustain a collectivity, this time a larger more general collectivity that we designate as human or humane. And it is such a larger sense of human collectivity that underscores, one might argue, a practice of the humanities or discourses of humanism. In moving towards a tenable conclusion to this chapter, I would briefly dwell on an example of what might be called an act of such "spectacular" violence and the responses it garnered. More importantly, I also seek to frame a possible response to the question that Said implicitly poses through his arguments in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* – what does it mean to invest in a practice of the humanities or a praxis of humanism in an "inhumane and genocidal" world? How does one continue to profess *philosphias* while living in the worlds that we presently inhabit? Moreover, should a praxis of humanism require one to embrace the pluralities inherent within the human condition, how does such a praxis translate into a practice of engaging alterity even when it appears most radical, most Other? How does one respond to the violated millions across the world, in whose predicaments we are all implicated, who seem to echo

the refrain from a poem by Paul Célan, with open and empty eyes and mouths: “Bete, Herr, bete zu uns, wir sind nah/Pray, Lord, pray to us, who are close by.”

On January 12th, 2018, Mohammad Yusuf, resident of a village in the Kathua district of the Northern Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, reported his 8-year-old daughter Asifa Bano as missing with the nearest police station. On January 17th the police found her body, and an ensuing autopsy revealed that she had been repeatedly assaulted and raped. A report released on January 22nd of the postmortem forensic investigation confirmed as many as eight potential rapists. The ensuing list of arrestees included four police officers. The postmortem reports also confirmed the presence of clonazepam and in conjunction with signs of struggle recorded on her corpse, the report confirmed that she had been drugged, sedated, held hostage for several days, raped repeatedly, and finally was killed by strangulation and blunt-force trauma to the head. Further forensic investigation identified a local Hindu temple in the area as a site for the rapes and subsequent murder of Asifa Bano. The story got increasingly convoluted over the weeks following the initial missing child report, the discovery of the body in a neighboring forested area, the forensic investigation and the subsequent conviction of the perpetrators.

Asifa Bano belonged to the Bakhrawal community, a semi-nomadic Muslim community, living in the predominantly Hindu populated region of Kathua in Jammu. There had been a history of hostility and animosity towards the Bakhrawals with attempts to evict them from the region. A story in a leading Indian news network revealed that the initial “charge-sheet” filed by the Senior Superintendent of Police in Jammu confirmed that the crime had in fact been a pre-meditated action to exact personal vendetta and “send a message” to the Bakhrawal community in the region. The fact that one of the sites tied to the crime was a Hindu place of worship has exacerbated already long simmering religious and communal tensions not only in Jammu and Kashmir, but across the

country. Some Hindu fundamentalist lobbies had, in the weeks that followed, come out in support of the perpetrators justifying their actions and demanding their release, while other liberal Hindu voices came out in condemnation and horror over the fact that something so heinous could have been carried out in a place of worship. And while the rapes and murder of Asifa Bano have shocked the world at large, with condemnations from the United Nations Secretary-General, a civilian memorial in Munich and nation-wide protests across India, each highlighting one facet of the horror the case represents, the true horror of the rapes and murder of a child is something that only "throws" one into silence – a retreat from the verbiage of discourse that Steiner speaks of.

It is no doubt easy, but equally dangerous to label the horror of actions such as the rape and murder of a child and the perpetrators of such actions as evil. Designating individuals capable of such acts as evil, certainly and justifiably removes Asifa Bano's criminals from the realm of the humane, but also and somewhat problematically from the realm of the human. It would most definitely be much less troubling to treat them as inhuman, and not just inhumane. The true banality of evil, however, to extrapolate from Hannah Arendt's reflections on Otto Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem, is the fact that it manifests in most banal and everyday human forms. At several points in her "Report on the Banality of Evil," Arendt emphasizes just how unremarkable and unspectacular Eichmann's life really was.

> "From a humdrum life without significance and consequence the wind had blown him into History, as he understood it, namely, into a Movement that always kept moving and in which somebody like him—already a failure in the eyes of his social class, of his family, and hence in his own eyes as well—could start from scratch and still make a career" (Arendt, *Eichmann* 33).

Such is the "Banality of Evil," and whether or not one agrees with Arendt's conclusions in a work such as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she does offer a very prosaic view of evil. We are no longer in realms of the kind of mystique or seduction in the presentation of evil that we find in characters

such as Bram Stoker's Count Dracula or John Milton's Satan. There is nothing extraordinary in the evil of Otto Adolf Eichmann and even the circumstances that led him to it were in the final analysis unremarkably quotidian. The somewhat troubling realization that such a contemplation of evil facilitates is that the *homo barbarous* bears a face no different from that of the *homo humanus*. Contemplating the human capacity for evil and the inhumane is as humbling as it is disturbing. However, a contemplation of *humanitas* in its entirety cannot avoid such a reckoning or a coming *face-to-face* with human capacities for the "inhumane" in the everyday. Again, one is prompted to ask, what is the meaning of a praxis and practice of the humanities in the face of the "evil" and the "inhumane?" It becomes all the more impossible to begin framing a response to such questions, if one arrogates a practice of the humanities as an "antidote" to the inhumane and the evil. The problem surrounding the "usability" and "serviceability" of terms such as "humanism" and "the humanities," and the practices they have come more to symbolize than actually signify, is in their automatic and somewhat erroneous metonymic interchangeability with the "humane." It is precisely through such an arbitrary metonymy that practices of "humanism" or "the humanities" have come to symbolically or even gesturally signify the humane. If we focus on the *essentia* of *humanitas*, rather than the *existentia* that constitutes it in the everyday, we are inevitably confronted by the humbling and sobering fact that inhumane is not necessarily inhuman and, therefore, the genocidal inhumaneness of the worlds we inhabit are just as much "human" as the things we designate as "good." And while agency in humanism comes perhaps from a conscious choice of the "good" over the "bad" or the "evil," or in an advocacy for the "humane" over the "inhumane," such a choice cannot be understood outside of an existence of preconceived polarities and without taking into account the myriad of intersecting interstices in between such polarizations. It is not enough to say that one cannot exist without another as a foil, as in the

recognition of the "good" happens only in an act of comparison with events of the "evil." Borrowing Heidegger's arguments in his "Letter on Humanism," a truly fruitful contemplation is one of the processes through which such categories are apprehended and assigned value. Similarly, a contemplation of the humanities or "Humanism's Sphere," as Said calls it, cannot ignore the phenomenological and hermeneutical processes that have historically come to define both its scope and meaning. Therefore, extending Heidegger's argument, a problematizing of what practices of the humanities can and cannot mean, is not of necessity a defense of inhumanity, or more specifically what I am calling the inhumane. It is only when we accept the kind of metonymic interchangeability that unequivocally and irrefutably recognizes the humane as possibly the sole domain of a practice of the humanities, that we begin to question the veracity of our practices as humanists in the face of the 'genocidal inhumaneness' of the worlds we inhabit. In such cases it becomes a standard response to first interrogate the very validity of the symbolic humaneness, represented metonymically through located practices of the humanities. It is from such a vantage point that one is tempted, yet again, to say: 'ask not of me for that love of days of old'.

The crisis in a practice of "the humanities" or in "Humanism's Sphere," one might argue is more in an inability to contemplate its limits. In practice, these limits sometimes seem completely arbitrary, as seen in the earlier-quoted passages from Said's *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, and by calling these limits arbitrary I am not undervaluing their operational veracities in the "real world." However, the extension of efficacy I speak of in understanding the scope of the humanities, is slightly different. I am speaking to the commonly held belief surrounding the practice of the humanities or humanism as an instructional practice that is teleologically, and perhaps even ideologically, tied to a realizing of the "humane." Therefore, if we think of humanism or the humanities as an instructional means to achieving the humane, we

are clearly setting ourselves up for deep disappointment and disillusionment. Then we would, and justifiably so, seek to quantify and qualify our practice as humanists in terms of a teleological output, and therefore feel a deep sense of failure when confronted with the genocidal inhumaneness of the "real worlds" we inhabit, because as practitioners we would have somehow failed to achieve our predetermined goals of realizing the humane. We would realize that we have neither succeeded in preventing wars, famines and plagues, and nor have made the world a "better place." I would argue, albeit on a most simplistic level, the humanist must abandon the belief and conceit that they are capable of such feats of wonder, but more importantly, the failures of humanity to act humanely are not necessarily the failures of the humanities or humanism. It cannot be a simple matter of verifiable causes and effects. Also, and equally important, merely being human (even a "practicing humanist") does not similarly, metonymically designate humaneness. I would go even as far as arguing that the realization that the "humane" exists, in some cases, despite the human, and can also be the basis for an ethical position.

It might seem that what I am proposing in these concluding passages of this chapter, possibly opens up yet another cluster of crises within a practice of the humanities and a praxis of humanism. However, I would reiterate that the most pervasive crises facing the human condition and therefore by extension the humanities and humanism begin in questions regarding the nature of alterity and an ethics of engagement with the Other. In the following chapters I will attempt to explore such questions regarding the nature and status of the Other within philosophical discourses alongside possibilities of the writing and reading of difference in a study of literature. My philosophical explorations will primarily focus on the works of Emmanuel Levinas, and the ways in which his understandings and explanations of the nature of alterity and an ethics of engaging the Other, potentially impact our practices of a literary hermeneutics, especially as comparatists,

in reading literary texts located otherwise than our own immediate contexts. The literary texts that I will be reading over the course of the next part are culled from varied chronotopes, ranging from works such as *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison set during the American Reconstruction to *Chaturanga* (1916) by Rabindranath Tagore which was set around the early onset of colonial modernities in India. In doing so, I not only seek to explore how a writing of difference figures within the narrativizations and literarizations in such works, but also as a means to critically engage with the existing hermeneutic and theoretical parameters within which they are most commonly read. The readings of the literary works, in a certain sense bookend a more philosophical exploration into the nature of alterity and possible parameters for an engagement with otherness through the works of Levinas. In doing so, I attempt to emphasize the imaginative and narrative consciousness that operate within apprehensions and cognitions of otherness which in turn lay the ground for engagements with the Other. Both works, *Chaturanga* by Tagore and *Beloved* by Morrison in their own ways echo and resonate with the concerns expressed in this first part. Both novels in some sense narrativize, of course, in contexts very different from one another, the complex ways in which a larger historical context of nationhood simultaneously conscripts individual experience and inscribes itself on the lived realities of individuals. In both cases we encounter, for example, the feminine "*alter*" to a national and historical collectivity. Placing such literary readings on either end of a philosophical reading of otherness seeks to both add nuance and also problematize existing theoretical understandings of alterity and engagements with otherness.

PART II

CHAPTER 6

Towards an Ethics of the Object

This chapter seeks to address, not just configurations of the Other through philosophies or theories of alterity but place such philosophies and theorizations in a context of the literary imagination. As stated at the end of the last section, the readings of Tagore's and Morrison's works bookend the philosophical inquiries that this part makes into the possibilities for an engagement with otherness. Both texts at pivotal moments in their narratives offer the possibility for a deferment of judgement in confrontations with the Other as an acting subject. Such moments pose three somewhat inextricably related questions. Firstly, how does or can one defer judgement? Secondly, what necessitates such a deferment, and can one seek moral paradigms in engaging the Other, through such deferments? The third question that such encounters with the Other as an acting subject poses, is tied to the apparent superposition of an acting subject as simultaneously acting and potrentially acted upon. The opening passages preceding a reading of Tagore's text, focus briefly on some of the theoretical concerns Morrison outlines her non-fiction works such as *Playing in the Dark* and *The Origin of Others*, while gradually drawing such concerns into dialogue with other theorizations of alterity. The question I choose to begin with relates directly to acts of narrativizing the Other and the unique challenges such narrativizations pose in contrast to discursive engagements with alterity. I return to a fuller exploration of this question in the concluding chapter, beginning with a meditation on Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, before

moving on to the challenges that her most celebrated work, *Beloved*, makes on the reader. How does one make sense of a narrative that concludes in passages such as the following?

> "It was not a story to pass on.
>
> So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative – looked at too long – shifts, and something familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if it like, but don't, because the know things will never be the same if they do.
>
> This is not a story to pass on"
>
> - Morrison, *Beloved* (323).

One could chance upon such a passage and pause to contemplate that which is most apparent in it – the double edge of the phrase, "to pass on." The author seems to indicate that while such stories a difficult for the teller to tell and the listener to hear, they also demand to be heard and told. As Morrison suggests, it can be touched, but touching it would change everything, and therefore a reluctance to both tell and hear stems from such an apprehension of change. The question then, one might conjecture, is what is the source for such apprehension? It is not quite a fear of the unknown. Something that is ostensibly within the reach of one's touch cannot be wholly unknown or wholly unfamiliar. At the very least, one is cognizant of its presence. The choice then, to reach out and touch it or not, is an active one to be made. Such a choice is not necessarily always a conscious one, but it is nonetheless of one's choosing. In the context of Morrison's work, such a choice, as she explains in her 1990 William Massey Sr. Lectures in The History of American Civilization later compiled under the title *Playing in the Dark*, has been a defining feature in the histories of engagements with the "Africanist" presence in the United States of America. In this series of three lectures, Morrison reflects on the literature and literary culture of the period often described as the "American Renaissance." She does this for two easily identifiable reasons. Firstly,

it was during this period, starting around the early 1800s and lasting till the beginnings of the Civil War, she argues, that a sense of "Americanness" begins to most concretely emerge in both literary and cultural discourses. Secondly, Morrison seeks to further problematize the conventionally held notion that, such a sense of national identity that emerged around this period in history, was completely uninformed by and largely ignorant of the "Africanist" presence in America. The argument that she makes relates to the complex and intricate ways in which collectivities of selfhood, in this case an American nationhood, are often founded in contradistinction to designated collectivities of otherness. In the context of such a process of American nation building, Morrison argues, that the most conveniently proximal collectivity, upon whom a national identity could be inscribed, was the "black presence" (Morrison, *Playing*, 5).

> "These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature – individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolationism; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell – are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence. It has occurred to me that the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population" (6).

Morrison returns to a similar thematic in her 2016 Norton Lectures, later published in the volume *The Origin of Others*. As the title suggests, she seeks to explore the constructions of otherness in American literary discourses, and thereby broadening the scope of her initial inquiries in *Playing in the Dark.* While Morrison perseveres with the question of the "black presence" in an American cultural consciousness, she reflects more on the processes by which a discursive alterity is inscribed over an experiential otherness. In doing so she also reflects upon her own role as a writer – a black woman writer in America, a member of the very same experiential collectivity upon whom such discursive alterities were and continue to be inscribed, in foregrounding the lived experiences of otherness. Before one can proceed to unpack Morrison's project and its possible

implications, it becomes important to understand what one precisely means by the processes through which a discursive alterity comes to inscribe experiential otherness. In *The Origin of Others*, she identifies two interrelated systemic processes, namely being and becoming Other. A discursive space for alterity is built around the act of first identifying an Other. Once such an entity or collectivity is identified, a discursive space is created for it, which in turn sustains its otherness (Morrison, *Origin* 19-22). However, such discourses that define and sustain alterity soon lose sight of the very entity or collectivity upon whose existence they are founded. In other words, the very contrapunctality upon which the categories of selfhood and otherness hinge, then collapse into a discursive totality. Such a discursive totality can only function on abstractions that obscure processes of becoming and treats a state of being; in this case being self or being other, as immutable categories. We shall return to a fuller explanation of "totality" in our readings of Levinas' engagement with Heidegger's works in relation to natures of being and temporality and the possible implication such philosophical positions might pose in an ethics that is oriented towards the Other. In this part of my study I propose to explore such an ethics through focusing on questions of narrativizing experiences of the "otherwise than," as Levinas describes it, and processes of othering, and how such narrativizations; literary or otherwise, act towards deconstructing the aforementioned discursive totalities. Also, as Morrison suggests in the concluding passages of *Beloved*, what implications do such narrativizations pose within the *status quo* of discursive totalities founded on majoritarian collectivities of the Self. How do the processes of becoming other and the experientiality of being other challenge abstractions of alterity? Why is such a challenge met with resistance and foreboding by a majoritarian collectivity? Also, how do experientialities of otherness figure as traces or specters within discourses of the Self? As Morrison eloquently writes, something "familiar" starts to "stir" beneath the surface, should one reflect on

such abstraction of alterity for too long. Why are such recognitions of the "familiar" in the face of the othered, both intriguing and frightening? Is it because, in such moments of recognition one is forced to confront one's own complicity in the processes that seek to sustain the Other's seemingly insurmountable and incommensurable alterity? Is it such a combination of mystique and horror that makes narrativizations of experiential otherness, as Morrison suggests, "not a story to pass on," in both senses of the phrase?

It is precisely such an onto-poetics of the Other that I seek to explore in this chapter; the discursive processes – historical, social, cultural and political, by which the alterity of the Other is both generated and sustained, not only the creation of Others or the experiential realities of inhabiting such alterities, but more importantly the ethical implications of such processes for the larger human condition as a whole. In doing so, I will be drawing upon a both literary and philosophical sources. While the latter provides us with theoretical frames for understanding the structural, systemic and perhaps even the moral and metaphysical constructions of alterity, the former through narrativizing otherness offers us an imaginative lexicon within which we might begin to understand and perhaps even bridge the gap between abstractions of alterity and an ethics of engagement towards experientialities of otherness. It is in an endeavor towards such a lexicon that I explore the works of authors such as Toni Morrison, Rabindranath Tagore or Arundhati Roy in conjunction with ideas postulated by philosophers and theorists such as Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, bell hooks, and Paul Ricoeur.

So, the question one essentially begins with is, as Morrison suggests, how is the Other abstracted and more importantly why must such an abstraction be sustained. The metaphor of touch; choosing to reach out and touch it or not, in the way that it is deployed by Morrison in the

closing passages of *Beloved* emphasizes the fact that "touching it" will cause "things to never be the same again." It is precisely such an encounter with alterity that she seeks to facilitate through her work. As argued towards the end of the previous chapter, an apprehension of the human condition is futile if one resorts to the binaries of humane and inhumane – human and inhuman. Such an approach merely relegates the question of violence beyond the scope of a human collectivity. It does not address the source of the question itself or facilitate a praxis or practice of reflection on the human condition. If the task of thinking, as we have earlier seen in Heidegger's theses in his "Letter on Humanism," is in fact not a teleological culmination in knowledge or judgement, and instead a contemplation of the very process of thought itself, then thinking would first require a withdrawal from or a deferment of such a desire for knowledge through judgement.

Let us consider a brief example from the history of Islamic theology that explains, in my estimation, what such a withdrawal from binary logic could mean, especially one engendered by the desires for either judgement or knowledge, and what such a withdrawal could potential imply in facilitating what might be identified as the "task of thinking." The *Mu'tazila* or the *Ahl al-Tawḥīd wa l-ʿAdl* (Peoples of Monotheism and Justice) is a rationalist school of thought in Islamic theology that can be traced back to the eighth century. A primary preoccupation within early *Mu'tazilii* thought was the question or problem of evil and its possible relations to human free will. Such a question is often contextualized in the fabled origins of the school with the eighth century Muslim theologian and jurist Wāṣil ibn ʿAtāʾ (700-748 CE). Ibn Atā was part of the scholarly circle headed by Hassan al Basri, a very prominent Muslim preacher, scholar and mystic of the time (Watt 60). On one occasion there erupted a debate within two opposing camps of thought within al Basri's circle – the Murji'ites and the Kharijites, over the status of the "grave sinner" within religious life (60). The Murji'ites held that a "grave sinner" was still a "believer" while the

Kharijites argued that a "grave sinner," by virtue of having committed a grave sin, could no longer be accorded the status of a believer (60). Before Hassan could respond to this debate, ibn Atā asserted that neither position was entirely accurate, for the sinner must be considered to occupy an intermediate position and proceeded to leave the circle of Hassan al Basri (60). It is reported that Hassan remarked of ibn Atā that he had 'withdrawn' from the circle (60). This remark defined ibn Atā and those who chose to follow him, the word used in Arabic was *i'tazila* and therefore he or they who had 'withdrawn' were called the *Mu'tazila*.

The *Mu'tazili* approach in the context of Islamic theology, perhaps, serves as an interesting counterpoint for such contemplative processes. Despite gaining notoriety for the part they played in "unhappy episode of the Inquisition," under the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun during the early part of the ninth century, the *Mu'tazila* continue to be known primarily for their scholarly approaches in trying to bridge the gap between theology and philosophy (58). Despite the kind of fanatic dogmatism that they later seemed to uphold, the beginnings of the *Mu'tazila* were not in the least threatening. This is seen in the favourable account Heinrich Steiner presents of *Mu'tazilii* scholarship in 1865 (58). Such early European encounters with the *Mu'tazila* promoted a positive view of them as "the free-thinkers of Islam" (58). In such early European receptions, a deep resonance was seen between the *Mu'tazila* and "nineteenth-century liberal attitudes" (58). Such a view does not seem entirely untrue, when one considers the impetus that galvanized the early stages of the movement in Islamic scriptural hermeneutics. The *Mu'tazili* hermeneutic approach would come to be founded upon the symbolic nature of ibn Atā withdrawal from the debate between the two camps in Hassan's discussion circle. It is not a withdrawal from a question that is too difficult to contemplate, rather it is precisely because the question is difficult that one withdraws from it to contemplate. Such a withdrawal in the interest of deeper contemplation or

examination, perhaps resonates with George Steiner's understanding of silence as refernced in the previous section. One recedes into silence because one is forced to think before one can speak. In truth, the question regarding the status of belief can only be answered by believers themselves. The conflict between the Murji'ites and the Kharjites arises from the place of sin; and therefore, by extension the sinner, within a realm of faith, or to be more precise a realm of the faithful. Once again, the question here does not pertain to a conflict between sin and faith, the two have long co-existed. The real question is regarding the implications a recognition or an acknowledgement of faith in the "sinner" poses to the "faithful" and their sense of collectivity. Does such an acknowledgement of faith in those designated as "once-faithful" but now othered through an act of sinning, imply a propensity for sin in the "still-faithful?" So, as we see the question, for the *Mu'tazilii* approach, is one that goes beyond the mere binary of action and consequence. The question of sin or even evil, can quite simply be answered with a yes or a no. However, the question for ibn Atā was not regarding the status or even the *status quo* of sin, but rather the very nature of sin and the condition of being sinful.

Therefore, the question of whether or not one could assume *de facto* apostasy in an act of sinning, for him, was complex beyond a resolution in binary reason. It was not a question of passing judgement, but rather one regarding the very nature of judgement itself. One could, perhaps, think similarly of the positions Heidegger outlines in his "Letter on Humanism." As Heidegger argues, he is more concerned with the process or the praxes through which one is lead to judgement, rather than the act of passing judgement itself (Heidegger, "Letter" 255). The logic of judgement demands action. One is not denying the need for action, however, one is also trying to make room for the "task of thinking." By this one is not arguing for a separation between the realms of action and contemplation. However, it also becomes important to emphasize that one is

also not suggesting that the two can be seen as wholly collapsing into one another. Contemplation cannot always pass for action, as argued in the previous section such metonymic interchangeabilities can be as unproductive as they can be dangerous. As Arendt argues in *The Human Condition*, while the traditional understanding of contemplation separates it from the realm of human action by an order of superior magnitude, the categories of separation and hierarchization between the two have not always been clear (Arendt, *Human* 17). Therefore, a claim that both the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* participate in mutually reflexive ways towards the constituting of a *bios politikos* might not seem quite far-fetched (22-25). One might, as is usually the case, think in terms of a causal connection between thought and action, and while that may be the case, one might argue that action is equally defined by directionality and impact. In other words, actionability is also defined as being enacted upon, towards, against, on behalf of, and so on and so forth. In such a sense contemplation can both be an action in and of itself or at the very least actionable. Whether we see within the "task of thinking" a potential for future action or whether we consider contemplation in the most literal sense a species of praxis – quite literally a process by which thought may be operationalized, such processes inform and define, as Arendt would argue, a "*bios politikos*." Such a sense of relationalities is in many ways foundational to Arendt's phenomenology of the human condition, and one could therefore potentially extend such understandings to human collectivitities. Such an idea of collectivity, on a most fundamental level, it may be argued, is foundational to a *bios politikos* in the Aristotelean sense, as denoting a realm of human affairs. Being in the world, therefore, in such a sense is being defined relationally or by relationality, which may then form the basis for the building of collectivities. The building of collectivity in turn could be understood, and arguably so in Heideggerian terms, as a set of specific interrelations that are at once between beings and towards Being. However, it is in the being in

between beings that one might begin to understand, as Arendt would argue, action. For the purposes of our present inquiries, I would argue that such relationality through action forms one of the ways in which action as the basis for relationality between beings also potentially becomes a site for contemplating a relationship and engagement with alterity, and thereby ethics. I turn to a literary example to better illustrate such a possibility for the contemplation of ethics, and in doing so I contextualize my reading of the literary text in question within contemporary questions regarding notions of moral philosophy and moral psychology as raised by theorists such as Judith Butler. The reading of Tagore's *Chaturanga* embeds itself within such larger contemplations of the discursive constructions of otherness and more particularly constructions of the feminine as *alter* within the configurations and consolidations of national collectivities. The analysis also revisits the notion of performativity as first put forth by Butler in her 1993 book *Bodies that Matter*, but more as a demand for the Other to act in ways that are comprehensible to and assimilable into knowledge systems of a collective selfhood.

CHAPTER 7

Acting Towards the Other

"Why Preserve the Life of the Other?" This was the straightforward and yet immensely potent question with which Judith Butler inaugurated her talk at the Tanner Lectures on Human Values hosted at Yale University on March 30th 2016. What prompts us to preserve the life of another? How are we moved toward wanting to protect the life of another? What does this reveal about the self-appointed protector? What does such an act reveal about the one in need of protection? Does this desire to preserve and protect stem from security in one's own life and paternalism towards another? Another whose life is configured in terms of vulnerability? To whom is this protection extended and does its extension impart a value (differential of course) to the lives one seeks to preserve? If so, whose life is worth preserving? These "simple questions" emerge, Butler suggests, from her initial question – "why preserve the life of the other?"

It is undeniable that these questions come from a place of recognizing both identity and its *alter*. By *alter*, I mean that which is located outside of the identifying "I" or the collective "we." By outside, I also mean at the limits of the identifying "I" or of the more problematic inclusive collective "we." If, following Paul Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another*, one thinks of the "I" in linguistic terms, as a signifier (of which I am the sign), the *alter* or the Other, as Emmanuel Levinas defines it, is the limit or the extent of its signification. In commonsense terms, the Other limits the extent and the extension of the Self, in the simplest sense of circumscription. I am such and such or so and so, because I am not such and such or so and so. On the most basic level this differential is where a preliminary discussion of identity can begin. We will return to this shortly. For now, let

us focus on the questions Butler raises in the aforementioned talk and use these questions to navigate our way back to the problems of a signification in the "I." The intent or endeavor to preserve the life of another emerges from an understanding that this life existing outside myself is worth preserving. It is worth preserving, perhaps, because it has meaning for me or I am able to construct meaning from it that is intelligible to me. I understand its worth as a thing or being in and of itself, or in terms that are relational to my own. Butler states that such an endeavor to preserve is in turn circumscribed by the possibility of failure and the ethical ramifications of such a failure, which exist regardless of whether this failure is through an unsuccessful endeavor to preserve, or through a deliberate choice of inaction.

I am reminded of a pivotal moment presented in Rabindranath Tagore's novella, *Chaturanga*, concerning a young widow named Nanibala. This situation addresses both failures, but primarily focuses on the failure of an endeavor to preserve. Published first in 1916, the novella is set in a context of early colonial modernity in India. The story of Nanibala appears in the first section of the novella, which revolves around the story of the protagonist Sachis and his formative relationship with his uncle Jagamohan. Jagamohon is presented as an embodiment of British Humanism and represents the first generation of colonially educated liberal thinkers in India. This section of the text is set against the backdrop of social reforms carried out around the turn of the century in colonial India by social thinkers such as Raja Rammohun Roy, who used their colonial education and their faith in Western humanistic values thereof to interrogate the cultural values and social practices of their own context. A large part of these reforms was predicated on the uplifting of women within the context of Indian society and culture by the abolishment of practices like *sati* (widow self-immolation) and *purdah* (the confinement of donning a veil), and reforms

such as widow remarriage and female education. It is against such a backdrop of colonially mediated socio-cultural reform that one reads the story of Nanibala in *Chaturanga*.

The young widow Nanibala, who had most likely been given in a child marriage to a much older man, seeks refuge in her uncle's house with her old mother, also a fellow widow (Tagore 15). Following her mother's death, Nanibala is abducted from her uncle's home and is now on the verge of being kicked out by her uncle and his family on account of speculations regarding the nature and events of her abduction (15). They fear she has been "defiled" and would bring shame upon their household (15). These events play out in the house next door to where Sachis had recently been hired to tutor a child. Being his uncle's protégé, he takes matters into his own hands and rescues Nanibala from her uncle's home and installs her in the care of Jagamohan, whose moral indignation fuels his willingness to take her in, as he feels that her predicament is an indictment of society as a whole (16). As the story unfolds, we learn that it was in fact Sachis's elder brother, Purandar, who had abducted Nanibala and that it is possibly his child that she is carrying. Purandar and his father Harimohan device several ruses to force Jagamohan to throw Nanibala out of his home, scared that she might "spill the beans" on her abduction. When all else fails Purandar forcibly evicts Nanibala from Jagamohan's house in his absence. Jagamohan finds her and brings her back. Traumatized from the experience, she delivers a stillborn child (20).

The harassment from Purandar and his father continue and Jagamohan decides he will take Nanibala and leave for some place in the countryside far from the reaches of his brother Harimohan and his no-good nephew Purandar (21). Sachis, knowing his father and brother only too well, tells Jagamohan that they will not give up until they see Nanibala dead, and offers to marry her himself (21). Overjoyed at his nephew's moral courage, Jagamohon clasps Sachis to his breast and sheds tears of joy and pride (21). Sachis decides to marry Nanibala under the new "Civil Marriages Act,"

one of the reforms enacted by the colonial government in India at the time to facilitate widow remarriage, since Hindu Marriage Laws did not allow it (21). Preparations for a simple ceremony at the local courthouse continue in the face of stiff opposition from Sachis's father and elder brother, when in an unexpected turn of events, Nanibala commits suicide. She leaves a poignant note wherein she thanks both Sachis – her savior, and Jagamohan, in whom she had found kindness and affection that even her own parents had been incapable of showing her. She admits in her suicide note that she still harbored feelings for Purandar, her abductor and her abuser. She apologizes to Sachis for this weakness and hopes that she would prove worthy of him in a future life, but in this life, suicide was her only option (27).

Nanibala is never mentioned again in the rest of the novel and neither is Jagamohan. Confused and troubled by these events, Sachis leaves the city and goes off on a spiritual quest. The questions raised by Nanibala's death are left unanswered but revisited when Sachis finds himself in the *ashram* of a guru named Lilananda Swami. Here he meets a young widow named Damini who is placed under the care of the guru. Damini falls in love with Sachis and unlike Nanibala is willing to give herself to him, but Sachis is incapable of reciprocating her love. We are never proffered a reason for this inability and Sachis himself never makes a connection between Nanibala's rejection and his inability to reciprocate Damini's love. He is incapable of making such a connection. However, what interests me here are the questions that are left unanswered and the crucial turn of events in the protagonist's life that are left unexplained. The fact that the author leaves these questions unanswered opens up the possibility of multiple readings regarding the significance of the events surrounding Nanibala's life and death both within and outside of the narrative. Is Tagore trying to point to the lack of female agency within the discourses of the many reform movements in colonial India that ironically centered around women's issues? Could one

read Nanibala's suicide in terms of a rejection of all the reforms in Indian society that were trying to define the scope of her "being," without asking for her opinion or consent? Does Tagore suggest a critique of the "phallogocentricism" inherent within discourses of nationalism and nationhood in colonial India, through the character of Nanibala? Does one read her character as the feminine Other upon whom Sachis and Jagamohon attempt an inscription of a Western humanist "liberalism?" On the other hand, reading Nanibala's story through a subalternist lens prompts one to interpret her suicide as the only possible attempt that the mute subaltern feminine can make at a vocalization – a last possible claim towards any agency configured only in terms of a deferment. However, such an explanation, in my opinion, continues to leave the questions surrounding Nanibala's suicide, for the most part, unanswered. The most pressing question being how this "tormented" woman would find herself harboring feelings for her "tormenter."

It is perhaps this question that troubled me the most when I first read *Chaturanga*. It is also a question I find entirely too frightening to unravel a response to. This question and others like it, I would argue, comprise the limits of our understanding. They are frightening to me because they are wholly outside of my scope of understanding, because I cannot grasp the rationale behind the events in which another acts in such ways. A psychological analysis of Nanibala's last testament would be explained theoretically in terms of the Stockholm syndrome. Despite such a theoretical explanation, I am viscerally incapable of grasping the experiences and their effects leading up to its presentation. Literary worlds are rife with such instances that push the limits of one's capacity for comprehension. Briefly considering a more contemporary example, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Alice Walker's highly controversial 1992 novel, contrives a similar challenge to one's capacity for comprehending the Other's actions. The story revolves around Tashi, a minor character first appearing in *The Color Purple* (1982). She is from Olinka, a fictional African

country of Walker's creation where "female genital mutilation" is practiced. Tashi marries an African American man named Adam and moves to the United States during a period of civil war in Olinka. She escaped "genital mutilation" as a child but chooses to have the procedure done later in life. Deeply scarred by the trauma of the procedure, she goes mad. While I will not go into a fuller analysis of this novel, as I did with *Chaturanga*, I do allude to as and example for yet another limit case. The novel does facilitate a possible understanding of Tashi's motivations in having the procedure done after having escaped it as a child. She is torn between assimilating into a foreign culture and seeking to honor her roots in Olinka. However, it is not the motivations or the rationalizations of the act that I wish to emphasize, rather the obvious inscrutable alterity of such actions.

Why do these events trouble me? Is it solely because they defy what I would define for myself as a scope for human action – the limits of the humane, perhaps even of the sane? I cannot fathom how Nanibala could possibly harbor feelings for her abuser or why Tashi would want to willingly inflict genital mutilation upon herself. It is in instances such as these that the Other becomes the limits of any signification in the Self. It is, perhaps, what Levinas explains in *Time and the Other* as the limits circumscribing a definition of the Self. In this collection of four lectures delivered in Paris under the same title between 1946 and 1947, Levinas explores ideas foundational to his later works such as *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. In the beginning of the first lecture he posits three categories – the idea of an isolated and lone subject, the relationship to time and the subject's relation to the Other (Levinas *Time* 39). The constructions of the solitude of the subject form the basis of Levinas's critique of Heidegger's vindication of the solitary *Dasein* (40). He holds Heidegger's conception of solitude in the midst of a prior relationship to the Other as ontologically obscure (40). Such a construction of solitude, according to Levinas, is even more

problematic in envisioning how solitude can possibly be "exceeded" in transactional relations with the Other that constitute the idea of a collective, especially if the ontology of the subject is constructed in terms of an essential solitude (41). Levinas first suggests what such an "exceeding" will not be. For him, it cannot be knowledge, because the object is absorbed into the subject through knowledge, in a final erasure of duality (41). Neither can it be *ecstasis*, because in *ecstasis*, according to Levinas, the subject is absorbed in the object only to be recovered in its unity (41). The collective, then, could only be envisioned in the disappearance of the Other (41).

For Levinas, however, the idea of a collective or collectivity is not one where pluralism merges into a unity. The inability of realizing this collective, for him, lies in the very nature of the subject being defined in terms of solitude. He further explains this process in terms of a relation between the existent and existing; his interpretation for the idea of Being and beings as attributed by Heidegger (44). The existent in Levinas's reading of the Heideggerian Self places an ordering principle upon existing. The existent is the realm of the ontological, and it is in this movement towards the ontological that existing is contracted by the existent (43). Levinas defines the event of such a contraction as *hypostasis* (43). He cannot tell us why or how the existent is put in contact with existing; he only offers us the significance of such an event (49). It becomes manifest in the appearance of "something that is." This "something that is" bears existing as an attribute and is master of such existing, as the subject is master of an attribute, and it is in this mastery that the solitary existent emerges (52). Such a departure from and a return to Self is, according to Levinas, the very work of identity and the process by which the existent is closes-up upon itself as a monad in solitude (52). It becomes the basis for what "philosophers have always recognized as the amphibolous character of the I, it is not a substance, nevertheless it is seen as preeminently existing" (53). This "I" is solitary because it is configured in unity, or what Levinas defines as the

moment of *hypostasis*—the event where the existent exercises its power on existing. The operation of ontology only seeks to eternalize this event.

Existing without existents, is where Levinas posits the starting point for conceptualizing the subject's relationship with the Other (54). The relationship with the Other can only be understood in terms of an interruption or a rupture in the ontology of the Self, in the end of the control exercised by the existent on existing. The ultimate event in which the existent can no longer exercise control over existing is, in fact, the cessation of existence itself – the event of death. Death is different from suffering. Even if experienced with passivity, suffering is an experience and as such already signifies knowledge and the inevitable return from the object to the subject (70). Suffering, though painful and even if experienced passively, thus facilitates a reification of the *hypostasis* of identity – the vindication of the Self, in both materiality and spirituality. His reading of death is different from that of Heidegger, where it is configured as the event of freedom. For Levinas, death represents a final impossibility of a return to the subject (70). The finality of death is what makes it grievable. It is wholly unknowable. Levinas conceives of the relationship to the Other in terms of the subject's relationship with the wholly unknowable, in the most practical sense of the yet to be (79). Death forms the absolute limit of the signifying power of the "I." Grief stems from such an absolute unknowability, but also from the absolute loss of the power of the "I" for both the subject that has ceased to exist and the subject that continues to exist. From that point on, the "I" that was can only exist as object. This is perhaps why Levinas views suicide as "the final mastery one can have over being" or the "final recourse against the absurd," where the absurd is defined as the situation where "one is no longer the master of anything" (50).

Levinas provides perhaps a possible lens with which we can read Nanibala's suicide. However, I wish here to return to the initial question of this chapter by exploring what an endeavor

to preserve the life of another could mean. I wish to preserve the life of another because I see it as worthy of saving. I may see it as worthy of saving because I am invested directly in its safety. I may see that life as constitutive of a collective I define for myself. It may be the life of a friend, lover, or one with whom I share a kinship through birth. However, as Butler asks, what prompts me to endeavor to preserve a life that is outside of my collective – my people? What prompts Sachis, for example, and then Jagamohan to protect Nanibala's life? Jagamohan is ashamed of Nanibala's plight. Ashamed on whose account? His own? He does express an ownership of guilt in her plight, but in universal terms. This is "our shame" he says: "yours and mine" (Tagore 18). In the immediate context of this conversation we could assume Jagamohan is addressing Sachis. He could not be addressing those who are responsible for Nanibala's suffering, for they are not in the least ashamed of what they have done to her. This inclusion in the possessive "our" implies a shared base or core of values, and Jagamohan knows these values are shared because he was responsible for their inculcation and cultivation. This is why he was moved to tears when Sachis offered to marry Nanibala, because in doing so Sachis had vindicated him, his values and his beliefs. Nanibala, however, is not included in this collective, she is the object that this "you and I" address as the "that one there" – the one whose life needs preserving.

As I stated earlier, Nanibala's death plays a pivotal role in the narrative of *Chaturanga*. Following Nanibala's death, Sachis abandons not just the city where his uncle lived, but also his intellectual apprenticeship with Jagamohan. He seeks refuge and spiritual solace in Lilananda Swami, who demands absolute and unquestioning surrender as a prerequisite for discipleship, a far cry from debating Locke and Hume under the tutelage of his uncle. Can such an escape be interpreted as a manifestation of Sachis's grieving for the loss of Nanibala? What did this loss mean to him? He never expressed having loved her, and yet her loss prompts him to act in ways

completely alien to his character, as we encounter at the start of the novella. What causes such a drastic change? Is it Sachis's failure to preserve the life of another? He seeks to abandon all that had defined him and led him to attempt saving Nanibala's life. Does the endeavor to save the life of another, at least in this context, represent an attempt at expanding the limits of the signifying power of the "I?" Does the failure to preserve the life of another then represent the failure of what we saw in Levinas as the absolute loss of control in the face of death for the existing subject, and by extension, the absolute loss of control experienced in the *face-to-face* with the Other? One could possibly read Sachis's need to redefine himself in terms of such a loss of control. The failure of the paradigms of the Self in confrontation with an absolute *alter* forces him to seek new paradigms for defining a more powerful and efficacious self, necessitating a more detailed understanding of the constitution of the "I" – or what Levinas calls "the very work of identity." The argument, therefore, can be made that it is the constitution of the "I" that prompts the subject to act, or to borrow Butler's terminology, to perform. However, does such an action, if directed towards another, also present a demand for the Other to perform their alterity in benefit of the limits of one's own selfhood and subjective understanding? Can one read into such demands for certain performativities as the Self's attempt to extend itself in either knowledge or judgement of the Other?

In an essay titled, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Judith Butler addresses the issue of "theorizing as lesbian." What does it mean to write as so and so or such and such? Firstly, to write as or write in the name of is already an act of production, usually in response to, as Butler states, a request to perform as or in the name of (Butler, *Gender* 307-308). In her preface to the 1999 edition of her much acclaimed book *Gender Trouble*, Butler clarifies her use of the term performativity and the conceptual framework it represents in an understanding of gender. She

states that she draws upon Derrida's reading of Kafka's parable of the doorkeeper and the man from the country (xiv). Rather than taking a detour through Derrida's work and back to Butler's, I choose instead to look at the short parable itself in unpacking her notion of identity and performativity. Let us briefly consider the short piece by Kafka titled "Before the Law."

The parable is seemingly straightforward. A man from the country comes to gain admittance before the Law. The door to the Law is open but guarded by a doorkeeper. The man from the country begs for admittance and the doorkeeper refuses. Upon reflection he asks if the doorkeeper would ever let him in. The doorkeeper admits to a future possibility. He offers him a stool and the man sits down. Days pass and then years. The man continues to wait, he makes inquiry, tries to bribe his way in, but with no success. There are other doors and doorkeepers too, but the man has eyes only for this door leading to the Law and the doorkeeper who blocks his path. He could have just gone past the doorkeeper without seeking permission. The doorkeeper had even offered him this choice. However, the choice came with the cryptic warning – but I am powerful. Though he was the lowest of all the doorkeepers there, he was still powerful. What his power was or how he would exercise it if tried, the doorkeeper does not say. The man from the country decides, however, not to put the doorkeeper's power to the test. Finally, the world around him starts to grow dark. He cannot tell if his eyesight is failing him in his old age or if his end is near. He can, however, see the endless streaming light irradiating from under the door. He could never understand why the Law would be inaccessible, but as his end draws near he has but one question to ask: why had no one else in all these years come there seeking admittance before the Law? The Law is something everyone strives to attain, so how was it then that no one else came seeking admittance but him? The doorkeeper, seeing the man's now dwindling life, informs him that the particular door had been meant for him alone, and he alone could have gained admittance through

that door. Saying so, the doorman rises and tells the man that he is now going to close the door (Kafka 3-4).

What happens to the man? Why did the doorkeeper wait till the very end to tell the man that the door was his alone to enter through? Could the man not have gone past the doorkeeper paying him no heed? What does this tale tell us about the man? Is there a moral to the story? Should it have one? What happens if it does not have a moral? Does that change the way one reads it? These are questions that are perhaps best left unanswered. Here is what Butler has to say:

> "There is the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures up its object" (Butler, *Gender* xiv).

She extends the reading to gender – the production and performance of gender roles, expectations that end up producing the very phenomena they anticipate (xiv). Is Butler then implying that the constructions of gender perform the same function as the Law? But the man never gains admittance before the Law. How is the Law calling on him to perform a life of waiting? He does attribute a certain force to the Law, there is no doubt about that, otherwise he would not have made the journey to gain admittance before it. He never questions the Law or its force, like everyone else he strives to attain it. He does however engage with and question the doorkeeper – the keeper of the threshold between man and the Law.

The Law, in this short piece by Kafka, is constituted in its inaccessibility. The man from the country cannot gain admittance before it. It should be accessible, but it is not. He cannot see the face of the Law. All he can see is the light that irradiates from beneath the door – endlessly streaming. There are multiple metaphorical ways that this moment in the parable can be interpreted. The Law is absolute in its inaccessibility. However, such an inaccessibility can be,

perhaps, interpreted in one of two ways. The Law is inaccessible because it is absolute, or it is made inaccessible at the very threshold of accessibility through the interaction between the man and the doorkeeper. Presently I have no use for contemplating the former. What has always fascinated me about this story is the interaction at the threshold – the conversation at the *limen*. The narrative is both constituted of and constituted by the dynamics of the threshold. What is at the threshold is not the Law, but the doorkeeper, the Law lies in the beyond. What is also at the threshold is a conflict. What is the source of such a conflict? Is it internal to the man or is it external? I choose the man as my starting point because the narrative makes him apparent as its focalizer. I return to one of the questions raised at the end of my narration of Kafka's parable. Why could not the man have crossed the threshold of an unlocked door without the doorkeeper's permission? This is perhaps where Butler locates the constituting of gender in terms of performativity. She clearly delineates the coexistence or the cooperation between exteriority and interiority in the constituting of gender, "the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits outside itself" (xv). Such a view of gender and gendered identity, based on performativity, calls into question every conception of the "internal" or the "essential," thereby problematizing conventional gendered notions of selfhood and identity (xv). While Butler concedes that dismissing the entirety of the "internal world of the psyche" as effects of a "stylized" sets of acts is impossible, she notes that taking the "internality" of the "psychic world" for granted is also theoretically unsound (xv).

One could return here to the relationship of the existent and existing encountered earlier in Levinas. The problem of interiority and exteriority is in part answered by the relationship between the categories of the existent and existing that Levinas postulates in the event of *hypostasis* and the immanent project of ontology. The metaphor of the threshold becomes a powerful one here,

because it is at the threshold of the existent and existing that action or the inability to act based on identity and the performance of identity begin. Such a question has often been configured in terms of being, as in the case of Hamlet. "To be or not to be" is then not really the question if one considers the rest of the soliloquy. The question is really the part that follows, "Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer The Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune, or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles." This is rather the question that is fleshed out through the course of the soliloquy and in Hamlet's ever vacillating mind. It is not because he is not convinced of a need to "take Arms against a Sea of troubles," but like the man from the country in Kafka's parable, he also seems to negotiate a threshold. In Hamlet's particular case, the specific threshold he struggles to cross could very well be the legitimization of kin slaughter by killing his uncle who was also guilty of the same crime. Hamlet could be seen as being caught between the moral injunction to avenge his father's death and his own dilemma of committing in the process of avenging one crime another of the same kind. Does such an act not make him no better than the object of his vengeance?

In *Precarious Life*, Butler contextualizes a similar ethical conundrum in the context of the horrific events of 9/11 and the retaliation that ensued in the form of a war against terror. She makes the argument here that violence of a retaliatory nature, in being faced with the one's own vulnerability in the experience of violence, stems from structures that censor or prohibit mourning or grieving (Butler, *Precarious* 37-38). The question pertains not as much to the feeling of grief or the need to grieve or mourn loss, rather it had to do with the performance of grief or mourning; especially when such grief was performed publicly. Resilience in the face of adversity was the only acceptable public response, because in this particular case adversity quite literally speaking pointed to and designated an adversary. Partaking in such a discourse of resilience in preparation for the overcoming of both adversity and adversary, were one to put faith in the maxim asserted

by the then president of the United States, was the appropriate expression of a national identity (29-30). While it might not be quite as straightforward as the following proposition, but on a structural level, the argument does hold. Such forms of censure and censorship on grieving or mourning do implicitly valorize strength or power over vulnerability, and in doing so derealize not only the vulnerable but vulnerability itself. The cost at which such a performance of resilience or strength is achieved, Butler suggest, is a censorship on the exteriorizing of grief or loss, and this in turn facilitates the interminable renewal of violence in the face of an inexhaustible stock of adversarial objects (33). Notions of performativity, therefore, one might argue are not limited to gender alone, but may be extended to the performance of any identity. It is no doubt futile to contemplate primacy in such cases – what came first identity or performativity. However, even if one thinks of a transformation in identity, it functions along the lines of a performative prescriptive. As Butler rightly identifies in the case of a censorship of mourning, the performance of national identity was prescriptively designated as contrary to grieving.

I return once again to the question of gender and performativity in moving towards my concluding arguments in this chapter. The example in question seeks to further problematize the seamless passage that is implied in positing a connection between identity, performativity and prescriptions for transformation. In the fall of 2014, VOGUE India premiered a short film under their social justice forum VOGUE Empower that, as one might today say, "went viral" on social media. The film by Vinil Mathew, starring famous Bollywood actress Madhuri Dixit, was titled *Start With the Boys*.[16] The one hundred and twenty-one second short film is a play on the age-old gendered maxim: "boys don't cry." It opens with the cries of a newborn infant and follows instances in the lives of young boys wherein their performance of a gendered identity is

[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Nj99epLFqg

conditioned by this maxim. Such injunctions to not cry are not always configured in censure, for example, when a boy of approximately sixteen or seventeen runs up to his father in tears, overjoyed by the victory of his team in a soccer match, the father, also overjoyed, reminds his son of the same maxim while embracing him. The film also shows girls and women reminding young boys of such a gendered maxim. The film then abruptly cuts to the very stern face of a young man, possibly in his late twenties, his eyes slightly reddened and glistening. But as the camera pans we see him twisting the arm of a young woman. He forcefully lets go of the her wrist and the scene ends with a fade out of a close-up on the woman's face – bruised bleeding lip, bruised cheeks and a blackening eye. As the scene fades Madhuri Dixit's voice takes over stating: "From a tender age we teach them, boys don't cry. It would be better instead if we taught them boys don't cause another to cry." The film uses a powerful cinematic rhetoric of juxtapositions in making a somewhat seamless connection between the gendered maxim "boys don't cry" and a propensity for violence or more particularly gendered domestic or intimate partner violence. The message of the film seemed also to derive some force from a context of debates surrounding the issue of marital rape in the Indian Houses of Parliament earlier that year.

A radical feminist reading of such social justice advertising texts would immediately point out that the film continues to function within the structures of patriarchy in that it posits the power to cause another to cry by inflicting hurt or harm with masculinist gender performances. While this is not a question of whether violence of any kind should be condoned – retaliatory or otherwise, such a seamless transition that the film makes from the masculinist censorship and censureship on crying to gendered intimate-partner violence is an uncomfortable one, which is not to say that Butler does not also connect the censorship on mourning to violence in similar terms. Once again, I am not arguing that a connection cannot be made between the two, I am however arguing that

such a connection is more complex than a simple logic of causation. The logic of enacting identity and the endeavor to preserve the life of another, in my opinion, can be seen as stemming from the same place: the desire for knowledge or the desire for *ecstasis*, as Levinas defined by in *Time and the Other*. It stems from the power the existent exerts on existing, in the return to and the reification of the acting and thinking subject, the latter of course deriving a seemingly causal validation from the Cartesian maxim of *cogito ergo sum*. To act, therefore, can mean to act in the name of or to act in anticipation of, as Butler puts it, an "authoritative disclosure of meaning" which is in itself the means by which "authority is attributed." Such acts when directed towards another can be understood in terms of the extension of such authority beyond the subject, who is defined or made meaningful by it to objects existing outside of it.

As Levinas argues in *Time and the Other*, this cannot be an effective means of encountering alterity because such an encounter only serves to reaffirm the Self in an erasure of otherness. Also, in seeking to reaffirm the Self though acting in the name of the Other, one demands of the Other a certain performance of alterity. In endeavoring to save the life of another, one is not only imparting value to it, but by evaluating it in my terms – in terms intelligible to me. One is moved towards judgement or knowledge rather than a reflection on the "task of thinking." When one responds to Nanibala's final testament in *Chaturanga* or to Tashi's choice in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, one's response cannot be anything but visceral because one's parameters of cognition are completely futile and bankrupt in apprehending such events. The Other exist wholly outside of oneself. If that be the case, then what is one striving to achieve in saving the actors of these actions? To save them from what or whom? To save them from themselves because one lacks the ability to understand their actions? What shocks one more, the actions themselves or the inscrutable intention behind them? Or do they frighten one because one sees them as an interruption of a

continuity in one's own understanding? In doing so they undermine one's belief in the likeness one shares with another. Or does such a fear emerge from a wholly different place? If one envisions a relationship between the subject and another in terms of an extension of the signifying "I," in terms of an erasure of difference, does a rupture in this imagined continuity not implicate the "I" itself? The actions of the Other frighten me not only because they are beyond my understanding, but because in my insistence on unity I see myself being moved to act similarly. I do not understand the action or the motivations behind it, but I am frightened by the possibility of such an understanding, because this possibility would imply my acting in the same way too. It is in this sense that I posit a possible source for the endeavor of preserving the life of another can be found in the very work of identity. Herein Butler's work falls short, because in focusing on why one endeavors to preserve the life of another, the equally important question of how such an endeavor is understood and operationalized is left underexplored.

Like Levinas, Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another* explores a means of understanding identity. He also addresses the problem of subjecthood and objecthood. Basing his critique on the exclusivity of identification in language, Ricoeur seems to be making a similar movement away from what Levinas defines as the solitary subject in Heidegger's construction of *Dasein*. However, he furthers a radically different view in positing the Self as Another, not in terms of a comparison, but rather in constitution (3). While Levinas seeks to overcome the solitariness of the subject, Ricoeur posits the subject as not being solitary *ab initio*.

> "*Oneself as Another* suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other . . . To 'as' I should like to attach a strong meaning, not only that of comparison (oneself similar to another) but indeed that of an implication (oneself inasmuch as being other)" (3).

He further explains such a connectedness in terms of what he calls the "idem" and the "ipse." The simplest way in which these categories can be understood is perhaps in terms of location or locationality. This location is first primarily spatial, in the sense of the "idem" as the "I" here and the "ipse" as the "that one" over there. The Levinasian relationship with the Other is configured in terms of temporality – the Other is in a future time. Ricoeur agrees in the temporality of the "idem," but the "I," if we return to the Cartesian position of *cogito ergo sum,* as he does, is configured in the present (4). The extension of this temporality is, he identifies, a "lacuna" in an understanding of the Self in terms of ontological constructions, or to reiterate Levinas' position, the very work of identity. Therefore, for Ricoeur the "ipse" is not an othered self or a self that is deferred in the future. It coexists with the "idem" in the same time and place. I am simultaneously the one here and that one there. The Self for Ricoeur, in *Oneself as Another,* can only be defined relationally in existing simultaneously as the "I" here (and now) and the "that one" there (and then). The Self is both self and other, or both subject and object if one prefers, because the Self is an Other to another Self.

Ricoeur's elaboration echoes Levinas's definition of the Other in a work such as *Totality and Infinity,* in which he reflects upon what the Stranger can represent.

> "The absolutely other is the Other [*L'absolument Autre, c'est Autrui*]. He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say 'you' or 'we' is not a plural of the 'I.' I, you—these are individuals of a common concept. Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger [*l'Etranger*], the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [*le chez soi*]. But Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no power [… *je ne peux pouvoir*]. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal. He is not wholly in my site. But I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus. We are the same and the other" (Levinas 39).

I read Ricoeur's position into the last sentence of the quoted passage. I return, from this point, to the set of questions with which I began this chapter. Why preserve the life of another?

What does it mean to endeavor to preserve the life of another? Levinas does posit an absolute and irreconcilable alterity in the Other, but he also states, "We are the same and the other." In this similarity he does not see an erasure of difference, but rather an acknowledgement of plurality. It is in this sense that the Other provides the limits of the Self, in that it constructs the limits of the unity of the Self – beyond which only plurality can exist. The Other cannot be saved in terms that are mine. Such action would still amount to an exercise of the Self's sovereign signifying power, and therefore any endeavor to save becomes paternalistic. Here I both agree and disagree with Butler's views on precarity. The link Butler makes in her aforementioned talk and in *Precarious Life* can easily be misunderstood as no more than an inversion of the Foucauldian paradigm of power and marginality. The less precarious life deems the more precarious life worthy of saving; it deems its loss grievable. In such a scenario, saving of another's life becomes no more than a vindication of the veracity of the Self. It only reaffirms an *a priori* magnanimity of the subject. A magnanimity either in understanding the suffering of another and working towards remedying it, or a magnanimity in the experience of and ennoblement through suffering.

In conclusion, I return to the title of this chapter. The question is one, as Butler rightly points out, of moral psychology and moral philosophy, but what I am suggesting is also a move from the moral to the ethical. We live in times that demand from us moral positions that are often labeled ethical. The problem is that we assume ethics to be an *a priori* universal category. In positing the ethical as contingent, I am not arguing in favor of a nihilistic anarchism. We live today surrounded by contesting claims of identity that assert their magnanimity in experiences of suffering or in endeavoring to remedy suffering seek affirmation and vindication. Such gestures lead to no more than articulations of comparative and contesting claims of saviorhood or victimhood. While conditions of marginality may be unique to a particular marginal group in that

the specific experience of their marginality or oppression is grounded in specific and located historical processes, marginality as condition is not unique. The study of marginality has gained much ground in academe over the last few decades. We have seen one form of victimhood after another become the center of interest in the humanities and the social sciences: the gendered other, the racial other, the psychological other, the religious other, the sexual other, the colonized other, the postcolonial other, and the list goes on. What happens to these marginalities once the interest in them fades? Do we assume that they are no longer marginal and therefore no longer need the attention? Do we claim to have cured the condition's marginality, congratulate ourselves on our success and move on? Or have we simply exhausted all we could possibly say about a particular marginal other, and are relying on the short life of public memory as we wait for the next victim in need of saving to emerge? Also, in moving to the next victim do our parameters for the performativity of victimhood and, by extension, alterity change, or do we carry over the same demands of performance from one Other to another? More importantly, what is the positionality we claim in delineating these marginalities and in endeavoring to preserve their interests? Are we as academics and theorists claiming a share in the suffering of such marginal and oppressed others?

The questions I am raising here are of an ethical nature and have to do with the ethics of engaging otherness and the ethics of spokespersonship. By spokespersonship, I do not imply speaking for the Other, as some academic theorists seem to envision it. One cannot speak for something or someone wholly outside one's range of comprehension. One cannot speak for a context of oppression or experience that one has not experienced. This is not to say one cannot speak about it. It is in such a distinction, perhaps, between speaking for and speaking about, that an ethical praxis of engaging the Other can begin. This understanding can only stem from the recognition, as Ricoeur states, of oneself as another. It makes for a powerful rhetoric to claim that

there is no “I” without a “you” and that in saving the life of another we are in fact saving a life that is our own. One endeavors to save the life of another because we believe in their right to exist as we do in our own. It is beautiful to expound on the enrichment the Other brings to our own lives and our own existences. But whoever said the Other ever agreed to become the substratum of our existence or to serve towards our enrichment?

CHAPTER 8

Reading Alterity

The question then, is how do such praxes of contemplation, or as Heidegger would describe it, "the task of thinking," function when directed towards the Other? One might argue that such a question of being towards the Other, forms the core of Levinas' engagement with Heidegger, especially in works such as *Time and the Other*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, delivered first between 1946-47 as a series of four lectures at the Collège Philosophique, the ideas contained herein would go on to become foundational to Levinas' future works such as *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. He engages with the phenomenological tradition as a whole beginning with Hegel and later Husserl, and finally leading up to Heidegger. As Richard A. Cohen suggests in his translator's introduction to *Time and the Other*, "Levinas' phenomenology is driven by a desire for an exteriority that remains irreducibly exterior, therefore it aims for a liberation from rather than a realization of totality, unity and the self-same" (Cohen 2). It is such a desire for exteriority that does not collapse back into a total truth that "knows itself and knows itself to know all" (3). I make my examination of Levinas' phenomenology of exteriority a possible path of return for a fuller exploration, in my next chapter, into Morrison's literary imagination wherein she seeks to undo the abstraction of otherness through narrativizing experiences of alterity. In the following passages, I attempt to map the progression of such an idea of exteriority in Levinas' philosophy across three principle works: first his foundational explorations into the interrelations between being, temporality and the Other within the phenomenological tradition in *Time and the Other*, next I trace the ways in which such a relationality is further unpacked in terms of an understanding

of alterity in *Totality and Infinity* and finally the possibility for an ethics towards the Other that he posits in *Otherwise than Being*.

In his first lecture in *Time and Being*, Levinas' begins by directly addressing the idea of Being, as it is expressed and defined in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The Being or *Dasein* in Levinas' reading of *Being and Time* is defined in terms of solitude (Levinas, *Time* 40). Any relationship with exteriority in such a schematic, he argues, can only be "transitive:"

> "I touch an object, I see the other. But I *am* not the other. I am all alone. It is thus being in me, the fact that I exist, my *existing*, that constitutes the absolutely intransitive element, something without intentionality or relationship. One can exchange everything between beings except existing. Inasmuch as I am, I am a monad. It is by existing that I am without windows and doors, and not by some content in me that would be incommunicable. If it is incommunicable, it is because it is rooted in my being, which is what is most private in me. In this way every enlargement of my knowledge or of my means of self-expression remains without effect on my relationship with existing, the interior relationship par excellence" (42).

The solitary nature of Being in its relationship between beings and temporality in such an explication of existence, that "resists every relationship and multiplicity," becomes Levinas' primary critique of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and of ontology in general (43). Now it is important to emphasize, that Levinas' criticisms are not directed at Heidegger's philosophical methodologies per se, but rather that one arrives at such a solitary understanding of existence through his engagements with ontic-ontological lines of interrogating the nature of Being: "… *fundamental ontology*, from which alone all other ontologies can originate, must be sought in the *existential analysis of Dasein*" (Heidegger, *Being* 12). Thusly configured, in solitude, resisting all multiplicity and possible relationality, how could such a being be towards another? However, for Levinas, even solitude; a characteristic attribute of existence, is also made possible through existing multiplicities (Levinas, *Time* 43). The move towards the ontological, leads to the event he calls "hypostasis," "wherein the existent contracts existence."

For the purposes of his own reading and analysis, Levinas renders the terms "Being" and "being" from Heidegger's work as "existing" and "existent" in his own work (44). The differentiation, without a clearly defined separation, between the two categories is, he argues, what is most powerful in Heidegger's work. It permits, Levinas suggests, the dispelling of certain, "equivocations of philosophy in the course of its history, where one started with existing to arrive at the existent possessing existing fully, God" (44). However, that existing is always grasped in the existent, also means that existence is always made meaningful in existing, and for Levinas irreducible exteriority can only be approached in existing without existents. The question then is, how can such an existence be imagined. Being is solitary, Levinas reminds us at several points across the four lectures collected in *Time and the Other*, the "amphibolous character of the 'I'," he states exists "preeminently" and without materiality (53). As a mode of existing itself, the "I" configured in a present temporality, is what becomes foundational to the constituting of a solitary self – a hypostatized temporality that is the very formation of identity in an "I" (54-55). Should one assume fixity or permanence in the emergence of such an "amphibolous 'I'," this process – that makes the very work of identity possible, also culminates in the existent or being closing in upon itself, and therefore making the moment of identification also the moment of isolation (52). However, Levinas departs from such an existentialist view of solitude as being the source of tragedy within the larger human condition (55).

> "Solitude is the very unity of the existent, the fact that there is something in existing starting from which existence occurs. The subject is alone because it is one. A solitude is necessary in order for there to be a freedom of beginning, the existent's mastery over existing – that is, in brief, in order for there to be an existent. Solitude is thus not only a despair and an abandonment, but also a virility, a pride and sovereignty. These are traits the existentialist analysis of solitude, pursued exclusively in terms of despair, has succeeded in effacing, making one forget all the themes of the Romantic and Byronic literature and psychology of proud, aristocratic and genial solitude" (55).

He returns to a similar understanding of solitude in *Totality and Infinity* as a basis for relationality with alterity. However, in *Time and the Other* he focuses on how such a materiality of being is first configured. Matter, as he argues, is the "misfortune of hypostasis," because in an existentialist schematic the materiality of being is conceived in contradistinction to nothingness (50, 58). As Heidegger would posit, anxiety is "the experience of nothingness," and therefore existence is configured in contradistinction to the absence of existing: death (51). Here Levinas briefly reflects on the tragedy of Hamlet, and the tragedy of tragedy in such a context is the understanding that "not to be" is perhaps impossible, and that it is such an irremissibility of being that defines fundamentally existence – the impossibility of mastering the absurd even by suicide (50).

In *Time and the Other*, Levinas lays a philosophical and ideational foundation for what in later works, especially *Otherwise than Being*, becomes a basis for his concept for an ethics of engagement with alterity. As evidenced by his views on the solitude of being, he does not disagree with Heidegger's postulations on the relationality of Being and temporality. Heidegger's inquiry into Being, beings and the experience of Time and temporality, as he explains is founded in the fundamentality of presence: "*il y a*" (46). In *Being and Time*, for example we observe repeated returns to the Cartesian construction, "*Cogito ergo sum*," however, Heidegger is most concerned with the assertion of existence in Descartes' statement. The idea that, "Being is the self-evident concept" is the third of three philosophical predispositions, or "prejudices," as Heidegger identifies them, attached with an inquiry into the nature of Being, that others being are the assumptions of universality and indefinability (Heidegger 3). Therefore, he suggests, any investigation into the nature of something that begins on such unqualified premises, rests on an inadequately formulated question (3). In a relation he proposes between existence and temporality, Heidegger begins his inquiry into the nature of Being and beings. He defines such a relational condition as

"existentiality" (11). In separating his inquiry from questions regarding the origins of Being, Heidegger finds the meaning of "Dasein" in temporality (19). "Being in time," as he defines it, is tied to presence in time (17). Later on, Heidegger would argue, that in an understanding of what he calls Dasein, the "*existential*" takes precedence over "*essential*" and therefore, "As a being, Dasein always defines itself in terms of a possibility which it *is*, and that means the same time that it somehow understands itself in its being" (43). The temporality of the Dasein, Levinas argues, is always the present: the time of the Self. It is within such a temporality that Being is realized in beings, it is for Levinas the moment of hypostasis. The time of the Self closes in upon itself, at the very most it allows for a contemplation of past temporalities through memory, but even in memory, "The present is welded to the past, is entirely the heritage of that past: it renews nothing. It is always the same present of the same past that endures" (Levinas, *Time* 48). In order to contemplate any relationality beyond the Self, one would have to think outside the temporality of the Self. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas moves towards contemplating possibilities for such a relationality through contemplating a future temporality and the event of death: "The other is the future" (77).

In such a sense, if one thinks of the future as a species of alterity, death then would become the ultimate Other, and Levinas posits a possible relationality to alterity through meditations on death. Death, he argues, is never in the present, and what makes death the ultimate event, and therefore absolutely Other, is the fact that unlike objects which the subject can master, death is the impossibility of mastery in subjectivity (77). Any speculation or contemplation of death is per force in a future or past temporality. The event of one's demise in particular, or the fact of mortality in general shares an essential similarity with contemplations of a future time, and that is they are both wholly unknowable – inaccessible through the subject's subjectivity in the present. Here it becomes important to distinguish between the knowable and the fathomable, that which can be

accessed through systems of empirical verifiability and that which can only be imagined. The future, like death, is not unfathomable. One can fathom both within limits of empirical or causal reasoning, one could possibly even predict the future or in a somewhat realistic manner imagine the event of one's demise. To use a rather banal example, one can predict conditions of future illness based on factors such histories of family health and lifestyle. Doctors often predict life expectancies and quality of life based on a complex conglomerate of such factors. Therefore, one can fathom or imagine the future, but not know it, in as much as the experience of the future, much like the experience of death, cannot be accessed in the present. What also makes death an ultimate event in Levinas' understanding, is the fact that death brings us in encounter with something for which we have no possible *a priori* (74). We may have *a priori* frames for experiences of loss and thereof we might have a lexicon for mourning or for the articulation of grief or bereavement. Even so, such frames are referential of a past temporality, and never in the present. Therefore, the experiences of loss, grief, bereavement or mourning while making death fathomable in a certain way, do not provide one access to the experience of death itself. And therefore, while mourning and grief may exist in the present based upon the contemporal absence of a past presence, death itself only always exists in the future, as fathomable, but always wholly unknowable. Moreover, mourning, one might argue, is the means by which the still-living subject comes to understand the absence of a loved or familiar object, it is still an operation carried out by the subject within its subjectivity.

Such attempts at fathoming the event of death have long been a part of the histories of the human condition across space and time. Every culture, religion, society and civilization across the world share such contemplations through a variety of eschatological systems. Tibetan Buddhism, for example, has a rather systematized textual expression of its eschatological core in the form of

the *Bardo Todhrol*; often translated as the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. An expression of belief in the immutability of the living soul, the *Bardo Todhrol* begins with a meditation on the moment of death, when the consciousness is ripped from its corporeal substratum and is stranded in the liminal space in between the phenomenal world of living beings and the realm of the afterlife. The book is a compilation of verses that are supposed to guide the soul of the recently deceased through liminal spaces between the two aforementioned worlds. The recently disembodied human consciousness is scared and confused, trying desperately to hold on to its former life in the phenomenal world. One might even say it confronts the anxiogenic material nothingness in contradistinction to which its existence was defined. The verses are read as part of funerary rites in the presence of the deceased's corpse to which its soul tries desperately to cling. First, the now disembodied consciousness must come to terms with its demise in the phenomenal world, before it can be prepared for its journey into the afterlife. Though intended for the deceased's consciousness that holds on to its place the living world, the wisdom of the *Bardo Todhrol* is simultaneously grounded in the realm of the living and intended also for the living who will one day confront their own demise. Though it tries to bridge the gap between the *bardos*, or transitory realms of life and death, one cannot deny the significance of its performance or iteration amidst the living. The fourth section of the book is an "Introduction to Awareness:"

> "EMAHO!
>
> Though the single [nature of] the mind, which completely pervades both cyclic existence and nirvāṇa, has been naturally present from the beginning, you have not recognized it. Even though its radiance and awareness have never been interrupted, you have not yet encountered its true face. Even though it arises unimpededly in every facet [of existence], you have not as yet recognized [this single nature of mind]" (BT 4, I: 1-4 39).

The addressee in this case is no-doubt the deceased, however, what is also being addressed is the fact that the now deceased had failed to achieve such a recognition of reality during their lifetime.

The word *Emaho* in this context is an expression of surprise – surprise over the fact that the recognition being explained was not achieved during the lifetime of the deceased. Therefore, one might argue that the contemplation of death, a future event or the future Event, signals a praxis for the present, or in other words such a meditation over dying metonymically signifies a praxis for living.

The *Bardo Todhrol* is only one of the many ways in which the human condition has attempted to fathom death. However, the most common way in which humanity has sought to make the event of death fathomable is by configuring it in terms of an extension of the familiarity of the phenomenal world. The complexity of such imaginative constructions of fathomability range from the ancient Egyptians entombing their dead with articles from this world in preparation for a new start in the afterlife, to the intricately complex precepts of *Gilgul* in Kabbalistic Judaism. Therefore, while the unknowability of death and the future might not be unique insights that one gleans from the philosophy of Levinas, what is however unique is the parallel he draws between death and the Other.

The Other, in Levinas' philosophical framework is largely always absolute in its alterity. Building on similar ideas from *Time and the Other* he reiterates such a position in *Totality and Infinity*: "*L'absolument Autre, c'est Autrui*" (Levinas, *Totality* 39). The "stranger" on the other hand is similar to the Other, but seems different in one crucial regard, and that is accessibility or proximity. The stranger is within reach, but escapes one's grasp, one has no power over the stranger – the stranger is free (39). However, Levinas also points out that oneself and the stranger are, "the same and the other" (39). The stranger is still separated from one by their alterity, however, unlike the "absolutely other," there is a possibility for a recognition and a relationship. The alterity of the stranger seems less absolute, not in the sense of a movement towards unity, but

perhaps in moving towards a possibility for dialogue. Particularly in *Totality and Infinity*, he returns to a fuller exploration of alterity as an irreducible exteriority contrasted with a subject-centric totality. However, interestingly enough, it is "interiority" that resists "totalization" – interiority makes possible that which is "no longer historically possible" (55). Extending his ideas on the solitariness of being from his previous work in *Time and the Other*, Levinas identifies interiority as being bound with the "first person of the I" (57). However, the separation of interiority, as it was in *Time and the Other* is seen here in a positive light, because it is not the separation of solitude, but rather a "radical separation" that accords each being "its own time" (57). It is such a separation of interiority, in individualistically resisting totalization, which in Levinas' schema is the absorption of the entity's time into a "universal" time, this in turn makes possible an imagination of "Infinity" (60). We begin to see at this point how a radical separation from the other and the absolute alterity of the Other start to develop an ethical lexicon for an engagement and a possible relationship with otherness.

In his use of the future and death as metaphors for the alterity of the Other, Levinas establishes the unknowability of the Other. However, following the example of the *Bardo Todhrol*, could we perhaps find in the contemplation of alterity in terms that are absolute, distant and wholly unknowable, a praxis for an ethics of engagement with otherness that is relative or qualifiable, proximal and still unknowable, but fathomable or imaginable? Hence, by resisting the totalization of its own interiority, does the subject also liberates the exteriority of the object from a totalizing subjectivity? It is at such a point in the discussion that Levinas introduces the notion of "Desire" Desire can arise only where there is separation – outside of a totality of the Self. Such a desire does not seek an erasure of the separation, because radical separation is fundamental to its very existence.

Infinity is not an "object" of cognition, this would be to reduce it to the measure of the gaze that contemplates it, but it is the desirable, which arouses Desire, that is, which is approachable by a thought and therefore at each instant *thinks more than it thinks*. The infinite is not thereby an immense object, exceeding the horizons of apprehension and perception. It is Desire that measures the infinity of the infinite, for it is a measure through the very impossibility of measure. The inordinateness [démeasure] measured by Desire is the face. Thus, we are yet again confronted by a distinction between Desire and need: desire is an aspiration that the Desirable animates, it originates from its "object," it is revelation – whereas need is a void of the Soul, it proceeds from the subject (62). Desire, Levinas argues can only come to a self that lacks in nothing, a self that does not need to assert its selfhood, its subjectivity upon the object in order to accord value to its own or consequently the other's existence (62). Only a self that is completely secure in its interiority can desire exteriority, therefore, while ethics may be a practice towards alterity, one might argue that it is a praxis that begins in selfhood. Such a selfhood does not derive from an ontic or even ontological totality, but rather in a recognition of infinity, and it is only beginning in such a recognition that the intellect can aspire for transcendence (82). However, what is that the intellect seeks to transcend, its own subjecthood? What does such a transcendence mean? Or conversely, is one seeking to transcend the separation between oneself and the object of one's desire?

One could think of, for example, a desire for knowledge of the Other? By gaining knowledge of the Other, one might seek thereby to reduce the alienating distance of the Other's exteriority. However, is this also not a form of mastery, an attempt to extend the horizon of one's subjecthood, that is ontically and ontologically defined to, albeit even in good faith, "include" the Other – in so much as "inclusion" places a demand of comprehensibility upon the Other. Later as we shall see,

thinkers such as bell hooks, speaking about race relations in America, would describe such a process of "knowing" or understanding alterity as a form of consuming the Other – "Eating the Other," as hooks calls it. Such acts of knowing are consumptive acts, because in the process of being known or understood, the "marginal" Other is consumed within the subjectivity of the mainstream and majoritarian. More importantly, such a bringing of the "marginal" to the "center," even if it stems from a desire for the Other, implies an erasure of, either in part or in entirety, the very processes and conditions that define the Other as marginal in relation to a center. There is, no doubt, a desire for relationality operational within such endeavors of understanding or knowing the Other, however, such a relationality is achieved through a mitigation of the Other's attributive alterity, which according to Levinas accords the Other it's "own time" – the Other is consumed within subjectivities of the Self and thereby its temporality is erased through being thus known. For Levinas, therefore, while desires for exteriority and aspirations towards transcendence may begin in a desire for knowledge of the Other, any endeavor towards knowing the Other is also the very undoing of knowledge, in as much as the very act of knowing is tied to the subjectivity of the knowing subject – it is in effect a subjective epistemology in the most literal sense. Therefore, endeavoring to know the Other, clichéd as it might sound, is as much a process of unlearning as it is one of learning, one might even go the entire distance and say that it is a process of learning to unlearn, because as Levinas outlines early on in *Totality and Infinity*:

> "The absolutely other is the Other. He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say 'you' or 'we' is not a plural of the 'I'. I, you – these are not individuals of a concept. Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger [l'Etranger], the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [le chez soi]. But the Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no *power*. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal. He is not wholly in my site. But I, who have no common concept with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus. We are the same and the other. The conjunction *and* here designates neither addition nor power of one term

> over the other. We shall try to show that the *relation* between the same and the other – upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions – is language" (39)

The entirety of Levinas' itinerary is essentially summed up in the above cited passage. The relationality that he explores throughout the course of his work in *Totality and Infinity* is one that does not collapse back into a totality of the Self, and therefore treats exteriority as absolutely irreducible in the "understanding" between "diverse terms" (39).

We shall continue to further unpack the components of Levinas' arguments, so succinctly summarized in the aforementioned passage as we move along. From a literary standpoint, his position on language is especially generative within a context of discursive understandings of alterity. We shall return to this particular issue shortly in our discussion of Derrida's "White Mythology." For now, I would like to draw attention to Levinas' explanation of Desire and the preconditions for an ethical relationship between interiority and exteriority. It is not quite as simple as conjecturing that the paradigm of relationality he proposes demands a complete erasure of subjectivity and interiority. Such a reading of Levinas' positions, I will argue, is perhaps a rather pessimistic one. As we shall see in our brief reading of Derrida's concluding remarks in "White Mythology," thinking of language in terms of a "metaphysics of presence," in as much as such a metaphysics is grounded in a temporality of the Self, and of subjective interiority configured as a totality, is partly what reduces the Other to trace or specter. While Levinas would be in agreement with Derrida over the discursive operationality of such a metaphysics of presence, as we observed in the analogy of a relationality with future temporalities that he proposes in *Time and the Other*, it is precisely such a metaphysics that ontically and ontologically assumes the centrality of the thinking subject's interiority configured in a present temporality, to practices and processes of thinking (69). More importantly, when such practices of thought are oriented towards exteriority, the ways in which they are configured demands, for Levinas, ethical considerations. Such ethical

considerations do not demand the complete erasure of the Self's presence in a *face-to-face* with the Other, neither does it demand an erasure of interiority. Quite to the contrary actually, being towards another requires the presence of interiority, in fact the subject's interiority is both a precondition and a site for desire. Simultaneously the Other, is neither an object nor is it an "object of desire;" in as much as it is not something one can strive to possess through either power or knowledge, it is quite simply the Desired.

To reiterate Levinas' understanding of "Desire for the other," a desire for exteriority, in the context of an ethical engagement with alterity, does not stem from a sense of lack within the subject's interiority, rather it grows from a fullness, it is does not therefore treat the radical separation from the Desired as anxiogenic.

> "In separation – which is produced in the psychism of enjoyment, in egoism, in happiness, where the I identifies itself – the I ignorant of the Other. But the Desire for the other, above happiness, requires this happiness, this autonomy of the sensible world, even though this separation is deducible neither analytically nor dialectically from the other. This I endowed with personal life, the atheist I whose atheism is without wants and is integrated in no destiny, surpasses itself in the Desire that comes to it from the presence of the other. This Desire is a desire in a being already happy: desire is the misfortune of the happy, a luxurious need" (62).

Such an understanding of both Desire and the Desired, builds towards a notion of encounter with and the possibility for a relationship with the Other, that ties together desire, transcendence and responsibility in framing an ethical lexicon for engagements with alterity. The notion of transcendence itself evolves over the course of Levinas' thought, as seen from its earliest iterations in works such as *On Escape* (1935), wherein it appears as a "need" for "escape," however, in *Totality and Infinity*, his understanding of transcendence becomes an operational basis the *face-to-face* and a relationship towards exteriority. As stated earlier in this study, before one can think of such an idea of transcendence that facilitates a relationality towards exteriority, it becomes important to first qualify transcendence itself – the transcending of what, into what and why?

One might argue that a Desire for the Desired, moves one towards exteriority, and such a movement would imply a transcendence of interiority – a movement from totality towards infinity. There still remains, however, a question as to why one endeavors through such a process of transcendence, it could not be oriented towards attaining knowledge or possession of the Desired, because as Levinas argues, the Desired is not an object. The "need to escape," then, in the strictest sense of the term, does not stem from anxieties of an inherent lack within the subject's interiority. One is not seeking then to transcend one's present or presence from a place of unhappiness or unfulfillment, a relationship with or towards the Desired – the Other, is a relationality between two separate fulnesses, and as such is founded in an understanding that does is not preconfigured in a sense of lack in either party engaged in the *face-to-face*. One does not seek encounter because one perceives an unfulfillment within one's own interiority, in other words one does not seek the Other as means to the completion of one's interiority or subjectivity – as a reclaiming totality. "We are the same and the other," Levinas repeatedly reminds us. Exteriority, therefore, is irreducible precisely because it points towards the reality of infinity, it signals the infinitude of interiorities external to one's own – each being in its own time. Hence, transcendence is not a process by which the separate temporalities dialectically, analytically or even synthetically converge into universal time. It is through such an understanding of transcendence, that Levinas relates desire to responsibility. As we see in *Otherwise than Being,* responsibility becomes a preeminent imperative for being towards another.

Particularly in works such as *Otherwise than Being*, ideas of transcendence come be inextricably tied to a desire towards exteriority and relationality as a responsibility towards the Other. Further honing his explication of exteriority, in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas locates its site as the "Being's other." Such an "otherwise than" is not a site in the locational sense of the

term, neither is it a *telos,* for a teleology would imply a certain finitude albeit deferred, but rather it signals a process. As Levinas observes, "Being and not-being illuminate one another, and unfold a speculative dialectic which is a determination of being" (Levinas, *Otherwise* 3). Returning yet again to the example of Hamlet's dilemma, he further observes:

> "To be or not to be is not the question where transcendence is concerned. The statement of being's other, of otherwise than being, claims to state a difference over and beyond that which separates being from nothingness—the very difference of the *beyond,* the difference of transcendence. But one immediately wonders if in the formula 'otherwise than being' the adverb 'otherwise' does not inevitably refer to the verb to be, which has been avoided by an artificially elliptical turn of phrase. Then what is signified by the verb to be would be ineluctable in everything said, thought and felt" (3-4).

It is such a space of the "otherwise than" that then becomes, one might argue, a potential site for encountering and engaging alterity. Once again, this is not necessarily a physical, an ideational or even a psychological location, but rather the imaginative possibility for conversation. In the everyday one might think of such sites for encounter and engagement as locational, however such a locationality also signals a transcendence of location. Albeit, in positing transcendence as an attribute to such sites of encounter, one is not signaling a return to interiority by means of a passage through exteriority – it is not necessarily a hermeneutic circle, but rather an interminable hermeneutic process: it is an ever-continuing movement onwards and outwards from interiority. One does not need for there to be a return to interiority, because such an encounter, as argued earlier does not necessitate an erasure of interiority – one arrives at the otherwise than driven by Desire that stems from not from lack but from a secure fullness. There is no need to reaffirm interiority in such a movement towards exteriority, because it is not compromised in the process of encounter or engagement. By qualifying transcendence in terms of both exteriority and responsibility, Levinas emphasizes the impossibility of an erasure or resolution of the "radical separation" he defines as fundamental to being in the world. Therefore, it is not the site of

encounter that opens being up to a conversation with the not-being, rather one arrives at the "otherwise than" because one desires to be in the presence of the Other – one approaches the site itself with a humble supplication to be allowed to inhabit the Other's time. Responsibility towards the Other, is the cultivating of such a capacity for supplication. Levinas' use of the metaphor of death in *Time and the Other*, perhaps, takes on a deeper significance here. The "otherwise than" does not imply a literal death of self or the Self, rather the loss of control and power foundational to an ontology of the I, in a context of the "otherwise than" – an undoing of the totalization inherent within an identity based in the ontic I. As he reminds us in *Totality and Infinity*, "It is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization, but the Infinity of the Other" (Levinas *Totality* 80). Cultivating a capacity for the kind of supplication required in being towards the Other stems from such a recognition of infinitude in exteriority, it is a practice both of interiority and one towards exteriority that comes out in turn of a praxis rooted in a constant consciousness of the Other's infinity, of infinities exterior to one's being. It is important to recognize the interconnectedness and inextricability of the two practices. Recognition of the Other's irreducibility to a subjective interiority of the Self is an interminable practice of interiority in preparation for an approach towards exteriority.

If one were to sum up in one phrase, the nature of the responsibility described by Levinas in *Otherwise than Being*, it would be best explained by what he calls an "essential reciprocity" (Levinas *Otherwise* 25). What Levinas means by such a reciprocity and why it is fundamental to any possibility of engagement with the Other, is that beings always exist in relation to one another, such a relationality demands responsibility between and towards beings, because it is the understanding of such a responsibility that makes the freedom of beings possible. Reciprocal responsibility ensures temporal sovereignty – the sovereign right of each being to exist in their

own time and more importantly to not be held hostage in the time of another. Evolving from his ideas of irreducible and radical exteriority, such an imperative of reciprocal responsibility is essential to Levinas' understanding of ethics. With my own freedom comes the demand for the freedom of the Other, and understanding such a demand can only come from recognizing that I cannot be free while the Other is incarcerated, that while my own freedom is reciprocally tied to the Other's freedom, and that such a freedom cannot be experientially, subjectively or even structurally be defined through my own freedom or identification. Should I be in a position of power to do so, that I can legislate or advocate for the preservation the Other's freedom, but I cannot legislate or prescribe the structurality or experience of the Other's freedom. It is wholly exterior to me and therefore beyond my subjective understanding. Any attempt to define the Other, undermines the very principle of reciprocal responsibility that is foundational to any relationality between beings – it is tantamount to taking and holding the Other hostage in my own temporality. The Other cannot be sovereign in the paradigms of freedom I define for either myself or for them. It is such a radical and irreducible understanding of freedom that is essential to any meaningful praxis and practice of ethics towards the Other. Therefore, the "otherwise than" is precisely the site for a contemplation of ethics, because it necessitates that "radical separation" not be resolved or synthesized into an overt or covert "totalization" in Being. It is a space wherein one can begin to imagine an engagement with alterity that stems from a deep respect for the radical alterity of the Other, and while such a site allows a self to approach the absolutely Other with both Desire and Responsibility, it does not demand of the Other a performance of alterity that will not "disturb the being at home with oneself." The condition of exteriority, from which stems the notion of transcendence as a responsibility towards another, demands of the "being at home with oneself" a moral courage to overcome the fear and trembling caused by both the Stranger's otherness and

sameness – the feeling of abjection that often forces one to retreat inward and reclaim the totality of interiority.

We shall return to abjection and the feeling of abjection momentarily, I will be arguing that abjection is the feeling elicited from a failed encounter with the Other, or at least a failure to recognize exteriority as radically irreducible. Before moving on to the abject, I would like to dwell a bit on Levinas' treatment of language in relation to an ethics towards engagements with alterity. He posits language as a possible site for encountering and engaging the Other. In *Totality and Infinity,* he astutely observes that language is in fact a structure for relationality between disparate terms. Such an observation could be understood either semiotically, semantically or even hermeneutically. However, for Levinas, more importantly, language is the site where Being manifests, that said he also clarifies that a language that manifests the "I" as its fulcrum is a site for ontology or "totalization." The language of ontology cannot be a site for the "otherwise than." Even language that manifests the "I" to be, is the language of Being and therefore cannot accommodate its Other or "Being's other" in any terms besides its own. Whenever the language of ontology seeks to accommodate the "otherwise than" relationally, it still configures "Being's other" in terms of Being. Even so, language as a structure of relationality itself offers the possibility of a relationship with the Other. The language of knowledge can equally be a language for Desire, and such a discursive site, Levinas would argue, allows for an experience of the "absolutely foreign" or a "*traumatism of astonishment*" (Levinas, *Totality* 73).

As we are reminded repeatedly in *Totality and Infinity*, only the absolutely foreign can instruct us. However, this is not to imply a sense of distanciation, the absolutely foreign need not necessarily be at a great distance from me – physically, emotionally, psychically or experientially. Structurally speaking all beings are absolutely foreign to one another, by virtue of inhabiting their

own temporalities. Only beings can be foreign to one another – refractory to every typology, to every genus, to every chronology, to every classification. Consequently, the term "knowledge" itself penetrates beyond the object, in other words, the object of knowledge. The Desired then cannot be consumed discursively through either knowledge or desire.

> "The strangeness of the Other, his very freedom! Free beings alone can be strangers to one another. Their freedom which is 'common' to them is precisely what separates them. As a 'pure knowledge' language consists in the relationship with a being that in a certain sense in not by relationship to me, or, if one likes, that is a relationship with me only inasmuch as he is wholly by relationship to himself, a being that stands beyond every attribute, which would precisely have as its effect to qualify him, that is, to reduce him to what is common to him and other beings—a being, consequently, completely naked" (74).

Levinas deploys the metaphor of "nakedness" to indicate the "work of language" consisting in the possibility of a relationship where meaning is gleaned in and of itself, rather than appearing as "a privation on the ground of an ambivalence of values (as good or evil, as beauty or ugliness), but as an *always positive value*" (74). What Levinas seems to be arguing here through positing such metaphors of "bareness" or "nakedness" as counteractive to the "totalizing" language of history, is what can only be described as both poetic and subversive. Relationality, that is structural to language, including but not limited to the signifying function of words and the relational functions of grammar and syntax, is what allows one to offer oneself to the Other in language:

> "To recognize the Other is therefore to come to him across the world of possessed things, but at the same time to establish, by gift, community and universality. Language is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things which are mine to the Other. to speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundation for a possession in common. It abolishes the inalienable property of enjoyment. The world of discourse is no longer what it is in separation, in the being at home with oneself where everything is given to me; it is what I give: the communicable, the thought, the universal" (76).

Yet again, we observe a movement outwards, that comes from a fullness rather than lack. One communicates because one has something to give, to offer, something communicable. Through

language one is giving oneself up and giving of oneself to the Other. Such an understanding of language is different from acts of signification in an I, it is different from assertions of identity and identification. Rather, in an act of communication one is offering oneself up to be interpreted, opening oneself up to receiving "a borrowed light" (74). Language, for Levinas, is the passage from interiority towards exteriority.

It is important here to recognize that while being firmly located in the tradition of Western, or more specifically Continental philosophy, Levinas also actively engages with the "otherwise than" of such a philosophical tradition. Such an approach does not perhaps seem new to us today. The rather lively afterlife being enjoyed by Deconstruction as a specific legacy of postmodern and poststructuralist thought has constantly pointed to the "*aporia*" that exists in Western and Continental thought. As Derrida famously recognized at the end of "White Mythologies:" "Unless an anthology were also a lithography. Indeed, the heliotrope is a stone too: a precious stone, greenish and veined with red, a kind of Eastern jasper" (Derrida, "White Mythology" 271). Later, in *Acts of Religion*, Derrida acknowledge a politics of "missing thirds" in religious discourses of the West:

> "Yesterday (yes, yesterday, truly, just a few days ago), there was the massacre of Hebron at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, a place held in common and symbolic trench of the religions called 'Abrahamic.' We represent and speak four different languages, but our common 'culture,' let's be frank, is more manifestly Christian, barely even Judeo-Christian. No Muslim is among us, alas, even for this preliminary discussion, just at the moment when it is towards Islam, perhaps, that we ought to begin by turning our attention. No representative of other cults either. Not a single woman! We ought to take this into account: speaking on behalf of these mute witnesses without speaking for them, in place of them, and drawing from this all sorts of consequences (Derrida, *Acts* 45).

The "turn" at the end of "White Mythology;" the symbolic acknowledgement of the "Heliotrope" as "also" naming an "kind of Eastern jasper," has become, and perhaps unfortunately so, a "signature" of deconstruction. As in the passage quoted from *Acts of Religion*, the possibility of a

plurality is no doubt acknowledged, but always in absentia. The recognition of the absentee or an absence is what acknowledges the trace of the Other as a gap in discourses of the present, or in a discursive metaphysics of presence. There is no doubt a call for ethics here, but it is a call that always seems to recognize alterity as an absence. There is a difference between a designation of the "also, but not" and a recognition of the "otherwise than." The former expresses a failure to presence, while the latter an ever-immanent possibility for the otherwise present. The "otherwise than" and the aporetic cannot be one and the same, despite being seemingly configured in similar terms. The aporetic in this context therefore, one might argue is the impossibility of meaning that rests upon an absence. The "Being's other," as Levinas explains it, is quite simply otherwise than presence. The aporetic, or more specifically the "also, but not," functions to fix the Other, in a certain sense, within the frames of Being, it is an extension of "being-ness" to the otherwise than being. Here too, one is then trying to impose a paradigm on the Other, in defining a space for it in the "also, but not;" the Other is configured in and defined by its attribute of absence. How does one "anthologize" the Other, to extend the metaphor for a lament Derrida provides for us at the end of "White Mythology?" What is one being called to do here? Tacitly mourn the Other's absence or inaccessibility? How can one mourn the absence of something in discourse that one has never discursively recognized as having existed? Here, I admit to purposefully turning the tools of a deconstructionist reading on the very discourse of deconstruction itself. So, is anthologizing, speaking rather literally, not a lithography? "Unless the anthology is also a lithography…" (Derrida, "White Mythology" 271). Does not anthologizing function within a dialectic of exclusion and inclusion, in the interests of achieving a "representative" compilation? Lithography quite literally, is using the principle of the immiscibility of liquids to selectively imprint paper. I am not arguing my own disagreement with Derrida's philosophical positions, per se, neither am I seeking

to devalue deconstruction, especially as a hermeneutic practice that emerges out of a postmodern consciousness. Specifically, what concerns me, moving forward, is the very question of erasure or effacement that Derrida alludes to repeatedly in works such as "White Mythology." If the sign itself signifies all that which is not signified by it, then its significative presence also carries with it that which is unsignified or unsignifiable within it. The presence of any sign, that is made meaningful in its capacity to signify, is itself a moment of what Levinas would call *hypostasis*, because once its meaning is fixed as a sign in and of itself, or through its signifier, it becomes incapable of plurality on what can be fundamentally recognized as a semiotic level.

The question that concerns me more specifically in regard to such questions of effacement, is the very process through which it is effected. As Morrison suggests, in her epilogue to *Beloved*, what becomes of that which is disremembered, for disremembering is after all a form of effacement. It never becomes wholly meaningless. It continues to exist as something that through failed attempts at its banishment from presence, continues to haunt the present and presence, and all signification in it. As Morrison writes:

> "Everybody knows what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because nobody is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away" (Morrison, *Beloved* 223).

What narrative can the disremembered have? With what language can it signify? At best it can sign its presence, if its existence can at all be regarded as presence. The disremembered is perhaps a species of alterity that is different from that which is immediately designated as radically other, in as much as it is often deliberately othered. It is not in and of itself abject, but it is made so, and our complicity in its abjection only doubly emphasizes its abjectness. Such an abject is effaced

because what it signifies is all to horrifying to the Self and collectivities of selfhoods. It is effacement in such an extreme that we see narrativized in Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Through a reading of *Beloved* and through referencing other works by her, such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Playing in the Dark* and *The Origin of Others*, I seek to push our contemplations of alterity, relationality and reciprocal responsibility to contend with contexts of extreme human deracination. For Morrison, particularly in *Beloved*, the historical moment of such an event comes in lives of black peoples in America immediately following the abolishment of slavery. The Reconstruction for Morrison was a period wherein questions regarding the status of the formerly enslaved within the American citizenry originate. It is the complexities of precisely such a history that, one might argue, remain to be fully unpacked. However, the history of such moments – the event that lies at the heart of the narrative in *Beloved*, a slave-mother from Ohio killing her own child when faced with being recaptured under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, are what constitute the larger disremembered past of a nation that continues to contend with its own often fraught pluralities. It is precisely such a disremembrance that makes such histories, "a story not to pass on." Whichever way, we choose to interpret the statement, we struggle with and against the seemingly insuperable forces of effacement:

> "Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody every walked there.
>
> By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss.
>
> Beloved" (Morrison 224).

CHAPTER 9

Reading the Signing Other

The words: “The female as subaltern cannot be heard or read,” or at the very least an understanding of what they seem to convey have echoed through feminist thought from, perhaps, well before they were penned by Gayatri Charkavorty Spivak, and even that was well over three decades ago. Spivak’s essay has, by her own admission on several occasions, been read, re-read, and analysed nearly to death. It is not as though similar ideas had not been articulated prior to the publication of, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and Spivak’s has certainly not been the last authoritative word on the intersecting categories of subalternity and femininity. There is, however, something of value, however it be assigned, qualified or quantified, in such a realization, in so much as it points to – even if it does not adequately address, an alterity of a very specific nature. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison’s first novel, she tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young girl who gets pregnant from being raped twice by her father Cholly Breedlove. The entire town sees Pecola and the child she bore, who dies after being born prematurely, as an abomination. Some have sympathy for Pecola who ostensibly goes insane from the harrowing trauma of the experience, others simply do not or cannot confront the reality of her situation. Nobody thinks of the child that was conceived from the rape, except from Claudia and Frieda, the two young girls who become a surrogate family for Pecola. Claudia who is closer in age to Pecola and Frieda her younger sister of ten are the only friends she has, and their family fosters Pecola after Cholly runs away and her mother all but abandons her. Claudia and Freida are the only ones in the whole town

that we know of who are concerned for the wellbeing of Pecola's baby. The two girls give up the money they were saving to buy a bicycle and instead buy some marigold seeds to plant in the earth on the superstitions belief that should the marigolds bloom, Pecola's baby would survive. As we find out form the story, that Cholly who ran away after raping Pecola a second time and impregnating her dies in a workhouse, Pecola's baby dies from being born too premature and that Pecola descends further into insanity. We also find out that the marigolds did not bloom that year. Claudia and Frieda earlier thought this was case, "because Pecola was having her father's baby…" (Morrison, *Bluest* 3). However, we later realize that the marigolds did not bloom that year, not because Pecola's was having her father's baby, but rather because:

> "… it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it does not matter. It is too late. At least on the edge of my own town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, its much, much, much too late" (164).

As the two young girls who become the primary focalizers of the narrative in *The Bluest Eye* tell us, the grown-ups of the town looked away from her, and in the end everybody tried to "see her without looking at her," not because Pecola frightened them, but because they knew that they "had failed her" (162). In the end she became a scapegoat of sorts, expelled from the community for its betterment and health. The young narrators reflect at the end: "We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness" (163).

So, what narrative closure can Pecola Breedlove have besides insanity? The insane need not be thought of as readable or hearable, they need only be diagnosable and manageable, or possibly treatable. However, while Pecola may not have a narrative closure, her narrative is given a sense of closure through the reflections of Claudia and Frieda. She needs to be cast out, in a sense

othered, so that life as they knew it in that town could resume, even so, even within the stoic realizations that conclude *The Bluest Eye*, we are left with a question that is asked but never wholly articulated. What happens to the seeds that the earth will not nurture – to the fruits that go unborne? There is a passage in Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror* that reflects on the experience of visiting the museum at Auschwitz:

> "In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children's shoes, or something like that, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, for instance, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things" (Kristeva 4).

What is so specific about the instance of seeing a heap of children's shoes in the museum at Auschwitz? All the heaps of what remains from the worldly belongings of those who were killed in the Nazi death camps are a chilling sight, but there is something about seeing what survives from the possession of children that seems to be particularly disturbing. As Kristeva argues, one lives with the knowledge of mortality, however, what is distinct to moments such as those described in the above cited passage, is that death interrupts the passage of our present time. Why is this the case? Death when it manifests in such forms, it may be argued, disrupts the living world for a variety of reasons. One might be thrown by encountering the overwhelming presence of death in such forms, because there is no language within our various religious or metaphysical eschatological frameworks to address or understand such a presence. If we borrow from the lexicon Butler uses in works such as *Precarious Life* or *Frames of War*, these were not lives whose loss could be grieved. The apparent lack of grievability, is not on account of their deracination alone, but rather because their deracination also required a second othering, and othering through which the surviving can continue to live. It is such a cyclicality of violation and violence that causes the sense of abjection when one confronts the signs of what Morrison in *Beloved* calls the

"disremembered" dead. More often than not, as the earlier cited epilogue to the novel suggests, the disremembered must "quickly and deliberately" be forgotten because more often than not, remembering seems "unwise" (Morrison *Beloved* 323-24). Just as the grown-ups in Pecola's town see her while forcing themselves to not look at her, because deep down they know her present existence is a reminder of their failure to care. However, her baby who dies from being born too premature is a thing all too horrifying to contemplate. This perhaps echoes the second part of Kristeva's reflections on seeing the heaps of children's shoes or dolls in the museum at Auschwitz. The violation of the innocence culturally associated with childhood or the violating of the taboos against violations of such a nature, is what perhaps exacerbates the sense of abjection. The reason such signs interrupt one's living universe is the comingled sense of that which could have been but was not to be. The impossibility of possibility – the seeds that shrivelled and died unnurtured by the earth once had the possibility for life but could not be let live, this the thing that holds an unparalleled power to haunt – an overwhelming and all-consuming force of horror. Abjection is a specific form of othering because, as Kristeva emphasizes, the abject and the other share perhaps one characteristic in common, one can be faced by them. The power of horror that the abject is capable of then owes to that fact that in signing its presence it implicates us who are not abjected, in its condition of abjection. The deracinated other is terrifying, because it's signing presence points to our own failure in "saving the life of another," through either actively or tacitly participating in and benefiting from the very systems that effect deracination and abjection. The disremembered and unaccounted for demand to be re-remembered and recounted, because their forgetting is deliberate, albeit seemingly necessary. To reiterate the passage in the epilogue to *Beloved*, one could reach out and touch it, but one does not, because touching it will mean that things; the world as we know and understand it will never be the same again.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, one might argue, attempts to narrativize precisely such historical experiences of deracination and abjection in a context of post-slavery America. However, the story, which as the epilogue repeats was not one to "pass on," in a broader sense addresses the larger human question of disremembrance. As the dedications that precede the novel state, "Sixty Million and more," followed by, "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not." The former was the cause for some controversy among Jewish readers in the US, who felt that Morrison, through her dedication, was drawing an unwarranted parallel between the *Shoah* and the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. As then staff writer for the Washington Post, Amy Elizabeth Schwartz, wrote shortly after *Beloved* was published, echoes of a reference to the Nazi Holocaust did not go unnoticed in Morrison's dedication.[17] A particularly "hostile reviewer," Schwartz goes on to write, argued that the dedication was a ploy on the part of the author to "enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest." The review she references was by Stanley Crouch and had been widely critiqued. When asked in an interview with Cecil Brown about the disparaging remarks, calling *Beloved* a "blackface holocaust novel" and the accusations of indulging in a form of competitive victimology, Morrison clarified:

> "It's a misunderstanding, but it's more pernicious than that. The game of who suffered most? I'm not playing that game. That's a media argument. It's almost about quantity. One dead child is enough for me. One little child in The Bluest Eye who didn't make it. That's plenty for me. I didn't want to write about slavery because I didn't think I had the staying power. I didn't believe I could stay in that world for three or five years, however long it took. But I think the publications which are interested in that are the ones that Mr. Crouch works for. They are interested in it" (Morrison, "Interview" 455).

The challenges of reading a work such as Morrison's *Beloved* are central to a practice of reading itself, and particularly practices of reading comparatively. How does one read or what does it mean

[17] https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1988/04/03/beloved-its-not-a-question-of-who-suffered-more/b33f0191-2436-47d5-841e-c070004a96d6/

to read, but more importantly, how does one read ethically? It has to do with the hermeneutic pluralities and irreducibilities of the entity of a literary work. It is such concerns tied to acts of reading that parallel both questions pertaining to the "task of thinking" and an encounter with otherness. When one encounters a literary work, one is on a certain level encountering a represented experiential otherness albeit constructed within language. However, such a represented experientiality is at once locational and particular, while also almost tending towards being generalizable or universalizable. In such a sense, any hermeneutic operation carried out on a literary work, by virtue of seeking meaning runs the risk of what Levinas has described as "totalization." Reading is not an act devoid of subjecthoods and being therefore filtered through a subjecthood or even a collectivity of the same, it could potentially tend towards a *hypostasis*. Such a tendency is particularly true if one considers the literary work and its readings as events that manifest subjecthood, in other words an "amphibolous" signifying "I." An ethics towards the literary work then in a certain sense mirrors and could potentially inform a praxis and a practice of an ethics towards alterity, in as much as one thinks of the ethical value in preserving infinities from totalizing discursive forces. More specifically, in the context of *Beloved*, how does one read the particularity of an Other's abjection without resorting to hermeneutic frames that sometimes through acts of comparing, either universalize or essentialize or devolve into, as we saw in the case of Crouch's critique, forms of competitive identitarian victimologies?

Let us begin with the historical premise – the event that underlies the writing of Morrison's *Beloved*. When asked what her inspiration behind writing *Beloved* was, Morrison admits that she initially was reluctant to undertake the project, primarily because she did not want to write a book about slavery. The historical inspiration of course had been the story of Margaret Garner. Morrison had chanced upon Garner's story during some archival research while she was still working in

publishing (Morrison, *Beloved* xvii). Despite her reluctance over writing a novel about the history of slavery in America, Morrison continued to be captivated by Garner's story and the historical event that made her, "a cause célèbre in the fight against Fugitive Slave laws" (xvii). Her story was one of the most famous associated with the passing of Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 – an apparent compromise between the American North and the then still slave-owning South over conflicting interests surrounding the abolishment of slavery. Garner who had escaped to Ohio with her family was apprehended by slave catchers and US Marshals operating under the Act of 1850. Faced with emanant recapture and return into slavery, Garner attempted to kill all four of her children and succeeded in killing her two-year old daughter. Trial was sought for Garner in Ohio, which was a free state at the time. Here she could be tried for murder, as opposed to Kentucky where she would possibly have been tried, if at all, as property for damage to property. Garner had been memorialized in many ways, however, Morrison's *Beloved* seems to be by far the most popular. The earliest recorded memorialization in literature of Garner's story by a black woman in America was in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's 1854 poem: "The Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio:"

> Heard you that shriek? It rose
> So wildly on the air,
> It seem'd as if a burden'd heart
> Was breaking in despair.
>
> Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—
> The bowed and feeble head—
> The shuddering of that fragile form—
> That look of grief and dread?
>
> Saw you the sad, imploring eye?
> Its every glance was pain,

As if a storm of agony
Were sweeping through the brain.

She is a mother pale with fear,
Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kyrtle vainly tries
His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore
For him a mother's pains;
He is not hers, although her blood
Is coursing through his veins!

He is not hers, for cruel hands
May rudely tear apart
The only wreath of household love
That binds her breaking heart.

His love has been a joyous light
That o'er her pathway smiled,
A fountain gushing ever new,
Amid life's desert wild.

His lightest word has been a tone
Of music round her heart,
Their lives a streamlet blent in one—
Oh, Father! must they part?

They tear him from her circling arms,
Her last and fond embrace.

Oh! never more may her sad eyes
Gaze on his mournful face.

No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks
Disturb the listening air:
She is a mother, and her heart
Is breaking in despair.[18]

Harper was one of the earliest black women poets to rise to prominence in pre-Civil War America, publishing her first volume of verse in 1845 at the age of only twenty. Her poem on Garner was collected in her second volume of verse titled *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854). Harper's poem is very forthright in stating what is at stake: Garner had no maternal rights over her children. Like several black women within the system of slavery in America, she was procured by her owners as a "breeder" and any offspring she bore would be the property of her owners. Harper's poem does not describe the murder of Garner's two-year old daughter at her hands, instead attempts to imagine the terror Garner's son perhaps experienced on seeing his mother's murderous frenzy. The poet does, however, describe Garner as a mother whose "heart is breaking in despair." One could see Harper's poem as possibly defending Garner's actions, however, there is nothing in the poem itself that actively frames such a defense. The protracted nature of legal skirmishes underlying Margaret Garner's story perhaps have some bearing on the allusive subtlety adopted by the poet.

In 2010 the University of Minnesota Press published a book by American political theorist and historian Mark Reinhardt titled, *Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?* The subtitle of the book reads: "The True Story that Inspired Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." The book, as Reinhardt explains

[18] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51977/the-slave-mother-56d23017ceaad

in his introduction, seeks to present Garner's story in terms of a comprehensive account of its "primary sources" (Reinhardt x). Historical court records show that extradition was sought for Garner to Ohio, so that she may be tried for murder (8). Here is where the law at the time presented a convoluted set of challenges. The demand for extradition was in direct conflict with the Fugitive Slaves Act of 1850 on a very fundamental premise. The law that demanded the return of "runaway" slaves to their owners was premised on a worldview that saw slaves as property, and not necessarily persons in the strictest sense of the term. Therefore, to try a slave, even a "runaway" in a "Free State," for murder, a criminal act of human agency, would imply a legal recognition of personhood. The story is one of many twists and turns. As Reinhardt's book documents, Governor Chase sought extradition for Garner to Ohio and while the governor of Kentucky, Charles Morehead, had attempted to comply, it was rumored that Archibald K. Gaines who had claimed ownership of Garner and her remaining children at the time of her recapture kept moving her around, first within Kentucky and later as far as Arkansas and finally New Orleans (8). Garner's trail, Reinhardt informs us, disappeared in New Orleans and no further information seems to appear of either of her or her remaining children thereafter (8).

The situation is rather too absurd to comprehend today for a variety of reasons. One might conjecture the oddity of a reluctance to try a person in a court of law for a crime they committed, because doing so would be an acknowledgement of their personhood. Such an acknowledgement would have potentially thrown a spanner in the workings of a system that not only viewed, but more importantly functioned on the assumption of the limited and liminal humanity of the enslaved. Furthermore, there was the possibility of paving the way for questions being raised vis-à-vis the parental rights of slaves over their offspring, for if Garner were to be tried for the murder of her child she would have to be also acknowledged as the child's mother in a court of law. This

is not, of course, including the moral and ethical implications Garner's seemingly unnatural act would have raised regarding the system of slavery in early 19th century America. Could not Garner's murder of her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter and the attempted murders of her other children posit slavery as a fate far worse than death? What would such a view imply in a nation already historically divided over the status of slavery and the enslaved?

The notion that Garner was attempting to save her children from a life in slavery by trying to kill them, has become the historically accepted interpretation of her story. However, the question raised by Reinhardt's book is, perhaps, one of enduring significance. The fundamental difference, he stresses, between a work such as *Who Speaks for Margaret Garner*, and previous scholarly and creative works on same subject, is that it seeks to make available to its readers the most important "primary sources" for Garner's story. The question, however, still remains, who speaks for Margaret Garner if, as Reinhardt's book suggests, there is so little in terms of reliable "primary sources" for her "true story," even more so if the majority of these sources are not in Garner's own voice? Such questions are, perhaps, to be pondered in the context of larger concerns surrounding an ethics of spokespersonship and systemic problems inherent within representationality as a whole. As Reinhardt posits in the preface to his book, it was not until the publishing of *Beloved* in 1987 that Margaret Garner was returned to public attention (x).

In the foreword to a 2004 reprint of *Beloved*, Morrison reflects on the historical figure who inspired the protagonist of her novel: "Her sanity and lack of repentance caught the attention of Abolitionists as well as newspapers. She was certainly single-minded and, judging by her comments, she had the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom" (Morrison, *Beloved* xvii). Further, Morrison writes:

> "The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but, to a novelist, confining. Too little imaginative space is there for my purposes, So I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's 'place.' The heroine would represent the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror; assume the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim her own freedom. The terrain, slavery, was formidable and pathless. To invite readers (and myself) into the repellant landscape (hidden, but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts" (xvii).

Morrison in many ways anticipates the plausible and possible criticisms of her novel in the very writing of it. *Beloved* is not the retelling of a forgotten story, it is an attempt at imagining the seemingly unimaginable. As Reinhardt comments in the preface to his book:

> "Morrison let it be known that she had found inspiration for her book, one of the most celebrated American novels of the past half-century, in an antebellum interview with Margaret Garner. As she also stressed *Beloved* is not a fictional retelling of Garner's life or of the family's legal struggle: the novelist did not research the events in detail, and her alchemical imagination transmuted her source into a story that follows a very different trajectory" (Reinhardt x).

I wish to dwell briefly on a comparison between these two passages: the first a writer explaining her craft to a receptive audience, and the other a historian's view of fiction. Both endeavors seemingly work towards a common goal, a clearer understanding of Margaret Garner's life. The two endeavors do, however, approach such a common goal in different ways. Having said that, I do not wish to belabor the argument over which approach is more successful in providing a clearer understanding within which to contextualize Garner's actions. What I am more interested in here is what caused Garner, as Morrison states, to become a "cause célèbre?" As Morrison also notes in her preface, Garner was surprisingly sane in her lack of repentance over the murder of her daughter and the attempted murders of her other three children. It is perhaps such an inability to comprehend the motivations and her ensuing responses to the interrogations of her actions that have made Garner a hauntingly captivating historical figure, I would even further argue that it was

such a seemingly absolute inability to understand Garner's actions and predicament that intensified the desire to make her story understandable or, to borrow bell hooks' metaphor "consumable."

The metaphor is rather literal, in as much as the process of interpretation is one of consumption. In this regard, one must agree with Reinhardt's inquiry; who speaks for Margaret Garner? In her own historical context, she was spoken for, as both Morrison and Reinhardt point out, most vocally by the Abolitionists who were lobbying for her to be tried in Ohio for murder, to further use her case as leverage, and perhaps justifiably so, in the then ongoing greater struggle for the legal abolishment of slavery across the US. However, the entirety of such a notion is gleaned from Garner's unrepentance over killing her child. Garner herself never explicitly made such a claim. Therefore, if we seek the "true story" – as the subtitle to Reinhardt's book reads, then *Beloved* is perhaps not the site wherein to seek such factuality. The novel itself is a challenging read for a variety of reasons. Readers often cite the nonlinearity of its emplotment, the density of the language and the seeming absence of action that usually moves the plot of a narrative along. Structurally and even formulaically speaking, one might argue that the author gives us an epic in the form of a "postmodern" novel. The tale begins *in-medias-res*, and we move backwards and forwards till the entire narrative action comes to fruition and completion. The novel is not about the famous "Child-Murder" that is often thought of as having inspired Morrison's writing. In fact, as Morrison explains, the story is not about the act of murder at all, but rather the "feeling of that moment," a moment where a mother killed her child. In an interview, she recalls being asked by a friend or colleague, who assumedly had finished reading the novel, where exactly in the novel had Morrison depicted the murder itself. Morrison recalls responding by going through the novel herself and realizing that "event" itself was so buried in the language and the prose that it was easy to overlook. Also, the "event" itself loomed so large in the entirety of the narrative, that it did not

need to actually be depicted. We know fairly early on in the story that it happened and that everything happening in the narrative present is shadowed by the event of that murder in the past. However, yet again the novel is not about the event itself. If we closely examine Morrison's own reflections on her process towards the writing of this novel, we will see that it was the figure of Garner in history rather than her actions that fascinated the author. The novel then seeks to imagine what history leaves out or has no access to. What happened to Garner and her remaining children after history lost her trace in New Orleans? More importantly, how did she cope if at all, with a life in the shadow of having taken the life of her own child? Morrison remarked in her earlier mentioned preface, that Garner was sanely unrepentant – did she continue to see things the same way or did the horrors of her own actions eventually catch-up with her?

Morrison's novel does not offer any direct responses to such questions. However, one cannot entirely disagree that these questions supply the *rohstoff* to the author's imagination. The most striking aspect, of course, being a mother's unrepentance over the killing of her own child. The story inspired Thomas Satterwhite Nobel's famous 1867 painting *The Modern Medea*. Such a comparison between Garner and the figure of *Medea* was most recently revived in Steven Weisenburger's 1999 historical biography; *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South*. However, Weisenburger does not flesh out such a comparison through his work, rather he uses the title to invoke the popular perceptions of Garner at the time of her trial, as indicated by the title of Nobel's painting. Weisenburger echoes sentiments very similar to those that inspired Reinhardt's more recent historical study on Garner's life and trial. He acknowledges the importance of a work such as Morrison's and the place it holds in the popular imagination. He also admits having been inspired by *Beloved* to undertake the biographical project that resulted in his book. Like Reinhardt, Weisenburger also insists on foregrounding the factual history behind

the Margaret Garner story. Being himself a professor of English Literature, he recognizes the affective power of a work like *Beloved*, but also notes that literary representations often lead the reader from the particular to the general, and in his estimation Garner's story is not one that can be "generalized." Here is where I would choose to both agree and disagree with Weisenburger's positions on the matter. I am in complete agreement with the position that Garner's story is unique and not the story of every "Slave Mother." I also agree with the position that one cannot generalize anything based on Garner's story. After all we do not have a base in factual historical data to substantiate such a generalization. We do not have reports of other "fugitive slaves" killing their children to prevent them from being "reclaimed" into slavery, neither do we have historical data indicating a rise in the rates of infanticide among fugitive slave mothers. So no, one cannot generalize the experience embodied by Garner.

I would argue that it is precisely such an un-generalizability that keeps Garner's story alive in our minds. Her seeming unrepentance as Morrison points out in her preface to the novel, even more than her actions, is what captivates our imaginations. However, it is also her actions and her unrepentance that make Garner, what in Levinas' terms we might call, "absolutely Other." As contemporary and otherwise located readers, we share neither context nor code with her and she is in every sense of the term beyond our grasp. And while books such as Reinhardt's or Weisenburger strive to give us the facts of her story, they cannot explain or make Garner any more understandable to us. Once again, I emphasize the uniqueness of Garner's story, but the question is not regarding the inherent un-generalizability of her situation, but rather what we do when faced with such a story. Morrison, as earlier stated, tries to imagine a life for Garner through the protagonist in her novel. Sethe is not Margaret Garner, however, being inspired by the inscrutability of Garner's character, her story too is at times hermeneutically unyielding. Returning

to my earlier statement, *Beloved* is a challenging work because, while it builds on familiar hermeneutic frames, it also defies and undoes them. It has been read as a "neo-slave narrative," a "postcolonial" work, as "historiographic metafiction," and the list goes on. All the frames of reference usually applied to a work such as *Beloved* are, no doubt, legitimate, but they do not explain every facet of the narrative. As an illustration of this argument, I will present a detailed analysis of Satya P. Mohanty's reading of *Beloved* in his essay, "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On 'Beloved' and the Postcolonial Condition." I will also use the text itself as a counterpoint to Mohanty's historiographical and postcolonial reading of Morrison's work.

Mohanty's 1993 essay explores the epistemological basis for a cultural identity through a reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The relational axes defined at the start of the essay, upon which such an exploration is based are detailed as, "personal experience" vis-à-vis "public meanings" and/or "subjective choices" vis-à-vis "objective social location" (42). Mohanty goes on to argue that a work like *Beloved* is "in fact directly concerned with the relationships among personal experience, social meanings and cultural identities" (42). Based upon such a relationality Mohanty advances the claim that "'personal experience' itself is socially and 'theoretically' constructed, and it is precisely in this *mediated* way that it yields knowledge" (ibid. 45). Through an epistemology of cultural identity based on his own critiques of a "postmodern" position that interrogates the possibilities and veracities of knowledge itself, Mohanty creates a theoretical *mise en scène* to unpack the narrative *Beloved* in terms of its foundations in a "Postcolonial Identity and Moral Epistemology" (55).

> "These complexities are at the heart of Toni Morrison's postcolonial cultural project in her remarkable novel *Beloved*. Central to the novel is a vision of continuity between experience and identity, a vision only partly articulated in the juxtaposing of the dedication ('Sixty Million and more'), with its claim to establish kinship with the unnamed and unremembered who perished in the infamous Middle

> Passage, together with the epigraph's audacious appropriations of God's voice from Hosea, quoted by Paul in Romans, chapter 9: 'I will call them my people/ which were not my people; / and her beloved/ which was not beloved'" (55).

It is possible to argue that Mohanty's reading functions more on an understanding the individual's experiences of and in history, as indicated by the relationality he proposes at the start of his study between "subjective choices" and "objective social location." One could make such an argument in terms of the ways in which Morrison's narrative structure literarizes history. Mohanty's analysis places the "claim to a community" at the center of *Beloved's* narrative, and community is sought in an "imaginative expansion" of oneself or more particularly, "one's capacity to experience" (55).

History is directly invoked at the very start of the narrative as we are gradually drawn into the "spite" of 124, Bluestone Road (Morrison, *Beloved* 3). Other vignettes also begin to populate the chronotope that surrounds the spiteful house and its inhabitants. We are told that by 1873, Sethe and her daughter Denver were the only victims of the house, the grandmother Baby Suggs was dead and the two boys Howard and Buglar had each run away once the house had committed "what was for them the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time" (3). The state of affairs inside the house, however, is also contextualized in the goings-on in the outside world. We are told, for example that the house did not always have a number and that the city of Cincinnati did not always stretch as far as Bluestone Road, or that Ohio itself had only been a state a little over seventy years when the two boys had fled the "lively spite the house felt for them." One could speculate over the significance the mention of the year 1873 holds in the context of Morrison's narrative. Is the author invoking something in particular? The mention of the year locates the story in a crucial period within the history of the United States – the era of Reconstruction. However, it also locates the narrative towards the end of the Reconstruction. Five years hence, The Compromise of 1877 following President Hayes' controversial election in 1876, would effectively

end the Reconstruction with the withdrawal of Federal troops from all Southern states. There is perhaps, another reason why 1873 is an important year in the context of the novel. On the morning of the 13th of April 1873, Easter Sunday, there ensued a chain of events surrounding the Grant Parish courthouse in Colfax, Louisiana, resulting in arguably the bloodiest massacres of black peoples in the South with a death toll recorded at over a hundred and fifty black men killed at the hands of white Southern Democrats. In the history of the postbellum American South, the Colfax Massacre continues to symbolize the grave failure and the flawed basis of the Reconstruction's endeavors. I do not wish to belabor this history very much further, however, one could see the events in Colfax and the major preceding race riots of 1871 in Meridian, Mississippi, as directly retaliatory to the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment. However, the riots at Meridian and the massacres at Colfax were not the only instances of major violence during the Reconstruction. Staring with the Memphis Riots of May 1866, the period of Reconstruction was marked by several instances, sometimes multiple major instances a year, of pogromatic racial violence against black peoples across the United States and particularly in the formerly slave-owning states of the South.

I emphasize these facts in particular, because it is this very blood-soaked history that forms a context to the "claim to a community" that Mohanty identifies as central to the narrative of *Beloved*. In *The Souls of Black Folk,* a truly magisterial work on the sociology of the Reconstruction, W.E.B. DuBois poignantly observes: "How does it feel to be a problem" (DuBois 6)? The question embodies the predicament of black peoples in the United States following the proclamation of Emancipation and particularly following the end of the Civil War. This was the one question that singularly summed up in DuBois' mind the fate of black peoples during the Reconstruction. It is no accident that the emergence of bodies such as the Ku Klux Klan coincided exactly with the end of the Civil War. Until Emancipation and the end of the Civil War, black

peoples were firmly ensconced within the system and structure of slavery, a system that if we recall the conflict at the heart of Garner's trial, did not view blacks as people let alone as citizens with rights. The emancipated slave did not really have a place in American society or the nation's citizenry (21). The Reconstruction, the historical era in which Morrison sets her novel, therefore was a period marked by efforts to reconstruct and restructure the society and citizenry of the United States in order to accommodate black peoples, or as DuBois explains, to find a solution to the "Negro Problem" (12). And while none of this history directly enters the narrative of *Beloved*, it continues to loom in the background. The problematic "claim to community," as Mohanty identifies it, that forms an immediate context for the lives of Sethe and Denver as the sole-survivors of the spite of 124 is also equally informed by the spiteful past that was inscribed into the lives of all black peoples postbellum.

While I do not disagree with the fact that the desire for community manifests as a narrative drive in the novel, however, unlike Mohanty I do not recognize such a desire in Sethe, and most certainly not on an epistemic level. Prior to Paul D's arrival at 124, we see Sethe as a predominantly solitary figure. We later learn that any connection Sethe had to community was through Baby Suggs, and that such a connection started to gradually wane through Baby Suggs' prolonged illness. After her demise, Sethe and Denver lived more or less in a state of exile. The isolation is perhaps felt most intensely by Denver. When Paul D first arrived at 124, we see a shy and awkward, but more importantly lonely Denver (Morrison, *Beloved* 14). She had lost her grandmother, her brothers had abandoned them, all she had left was her mother, and losing her mother attention even for a moment made her anxious. When she sees how engrossed Sethe was in her conversation with Paul D, Denver secretly hope the ghost of her dead infant sister would make its presence felt (15). However, though trepidatious, Denver still feels a mixed sense of

excitement at the arrival of a visitor, she innocently asks Paul D to stay the night, especially after she learns that he knew her father. When Sethe responds by rearing up to strike her for suggesting such a thing, Denver bursts into tears, crying all the tears she had pent up since the death of her grandmother and their abandonment by Howard and Buglar: "I can't no more. I can't no more… I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either" (17).

It is true that the survivor of slavery must "begin by facing the immediate more directly," in order for a community to be built in commiseration with fellow-survivors of similar ordeals and is achieved through the "labor of trusting," however, the narrative Morrison weaves around the character of Sethe, in particular, constantly foregrounds the impossibilities of commiserations and trust (Mohanty 56). How can one undertake the labor of trusting when one has never known trust? Therefore, when Mohanty addresses the "cognitive task" of "rememory," one could make the argument that what makes "rememory" distinct from remembrance is, in fact, the impossibility of a cognitive function. "Rememory" is alive. The subject, in this case Sethe, who "rememories" cannot place a distance between the experiences of trauma and the memories of them. In purely psychological terms, both Sethe and Paul D show symptoms of post-traumatic stress, a condition that manifests in survivors of traumatic experiences as the inability, with time, to place a cognitive distance between their present realities and their traumatic past. When the "rememory" of the trauma is triggered, it is as though they relive the traumatic experience, in other words, the experience of the trauma has not naturally passed from an experiential level to a cognitive level. The subject, therefore, resorts to suppressing any recollection of the experience, rather than confronting or processing it, because any such confrontation would be all-consumingly painful.

This explains why Sethe would much rather live in the lively spite of a "baby's venom," rather than confronting the circumstances that led her to take the life of her "already crawling" child.

The novel abounds in instances of such inabilities the characters face in confronting or acknowledging their pasts. The only memories Sethe and Paul D share are those of their time in Sweet Home, and for Paul D in particular everything that happened to him after Sweet Home – though vividly etched in his mind, are private thoughts, experiences he cannot bring himself to share and keeps locked up in his "tobacco tin" heart. For Sethe on the other hand the years following her escape from Sweet Home seem to exist in an almost somnambulistic daze. After the two have sex for the first time, "they lay side by side resentful of one another and the skylight above them" (24). Paul D had fantasized a long time ago, like all the other men in Sweet Home had, of being with Sethe before she picked Halle for her husband (13). Now that he had finally had been with her, he came to realize that the consummation of his desires had come too late, his fantasies had centered around a young Sethe, and now when he had looked at her laying beside him, he was almost repulsed by her aged and sagging breasts, the very same breasts he had held in this hands a short while ago, "as though they were the most expensive part of himself" (25). His youthful imagination of Sethe did not align with the woman laying beside him. He could not seem to relate to her or her scars. She had called the scars on her back a tree and he had tenderly examined and caressed them, now they seemed like a "revolting clump" (25). His mind immediately shifts from Sethe's scars and the unfulfilled dreams of his youthful desires, wandering back to memories of Sweet Home. Sethe for her own part lays beside him feeling a different sort of resentment, the kind that came from a deprivation of not having any dreams of her own at all (25). This moment is very telling of the relationship the two characters share in the narrative present of the novel. It is also equally telling of the nature of any kinship or kindredness Paul D

and Sethe could possibly share. Therefore, the synthesis in their perspectives that ultimately points to a "new knowledge as well as a new way of knowing" that Mohanty proposes does hold (Mohanty 58). Such a possibility, as we later see, does present itself, but only at the very end of the narrative. It is true that they both recall synchronous moments in their shared past, but their memories run parallel to one another, while not really converging. Sethe remembers her "marriage" and how Mrs. Garner had laughed at her naïve idea of wanting a wedding ceremony to commemorate her union with Halle (Morrison, *Beloved* 31). Meanwhile, Paul D recalls how he and the other Pauls watched the ripples in the cornfields forming as Sethe and Halle made love for the first time, and how later they had cooked and eaten the cobs from the broken stalks (32). The memories though synchronous, form a story of polyphony, rather than a harmony.

Following this, Sethe and Paul D seem to settle into an awkward domesticity, punctuated intermittently by memories of Sweet Home. The ghost of Sethe's dead baby had been banished by Paul D, leaving Denver even more aware of her intense solitude as she now has to share her mother's attentions and affections with an outsider. Denver feels so abandoned that she secretly hopes for the ghost's return. Unable to bear her feeling of isolation anymore, she flat-out asks Paul D on the third day since his arrival, how long he thought he was "going to hang around" (52)? Paul D was deeply hurt by Denver's remark, while Sethe was somewhat perplexed by her daughter's behavior. In an attempt to comfort him, Sethe tries to apologize on Denver's behalf, to which Paul D responded by stating that she could not apologize on anyone's behalf and that Denver was grown enough to apologize for herself (54). Sethe becomes immediately defensive and Paul D is surprised by the ferocity with which she defends her maternal right to both chastise and protect Denver (52) He reflects:

> "Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left for the next one" (52).

However, recognizing the intensity of Sethe's emotions without entirely understanding them, while also feeling that it was not his place to comment any further on Sethe's relationship with her daughter, Paul D decides it was best to leave the matter be. Feeling a sense of remorse, Sethe suggests that Paul D, Denver and herself go to the carnival in town the following day. This is perhaps the only moment of a somewhat traditional familial normalcy in the entire novel. The three walked through the fair, and as they returned, the sun setting behind them, it looked as though their shadows were still holding hands, but we soon realize their happiness, albeit forced, was not to last (59). Their outing is plagued at the very outset by the smell of "doomed roses." Paul D was the first to notice the stench of the dying roses along the lumberyard fence, and the lingering smell of death heralds the re-return of a supernatural element in the narrative (57). The other townsfolk, Sethe and Denver included, either do not seem to notice the smell or seemed to have grown accustomed to it – only Paul D keeps trying to draw attention to the odor almost wondering if he was the only one smelling it (57). This only further seems to emphasize his sense of not-belonging – the same feeling that Sethe had sought to placate by a day at the carnival.

When they return from the carnival, Sethe, Denver and Paul D are met with the arrival of a strange woman. She had walked out of the river fully dressed, nobody knew where she had come from, and she ends up seeking refuge at 124 (60-61). Beloved's arrival marks the start of the central dramatic action in the novel. The formulaic "gothic" omens that precede her arrival on the scene – the cloying smell of dying roses and the disappearance of the dog "Hereboy," all suggest something uncanny about her presence. Sethe feels an unnatural and uncontrollable pressure in her

bladder causing her to urinate endlessly (61). Sethe is reminded of when she had been in labor with Denver and her water had broken while she was on the run after having escaped Sweet Home. The metaphors of birth foreshadow the strange predicament Beloved's arrival represents in the narrative. As the story progresses, we and the characters in the novel start to negotiate the feeling that Beloved was in fact Sethe's dead daughter: the ghost Paul D temporary expelled from the house now returned to haunt 124 in corporeal form. Beloved's presence in the narrative of the eponymous novel operates on at least three levels. On a literal level she is an actual person, probably living with the lasting psychological effects of some prolonged trauma. In the imagination and belief of Denver and later Sethe, she is their kin, returned from the dead, while furthermore, on a narratorial or diegetic level her presence facilitates the work of "rememory." Ultimately Beloved's presence and her eventual exorcism, will facilitate the "cognitive" task that Mohanty emphasizes in his study – the future possibility of a passage from "rememory" to rememberance. However, such a passage does not present a "new knowledge," if we think of knowledge as the process of learning something previously unknown, at least not for Sethe (Mohanty 61). The narrative revolves around the disremembered rather than the forgotten: the disremembered who must be re-remembered.

What makes such a journey of re-remembering fraught and painful, is the fact that disremembering unlike forgetting is not a natural process, it is rather the active suppression of traumas from a painful past. All characters, in one way or another, struggle with rememory – whether that be Sethe's suppression of the memories of her mother or the events following her escape from Sweet Home, or the memories and feelings Paul D locks tightly shut in his "tobacco-tin- heart," or Denver's struggles with disremembering that her mother had killed her sister and tried to kill her as well. Beloved becomes the instrument of "rememory" for the women in 124,

however, her presence becomes too much for Paul D, who is eventually forced out of the house by Beloved. After she recovers from whatever it was that ailed her when she emerged from the river, Beloved becomes obsessed with Sethe, never wanting to lose sight of her (Morrison 68). She was fascinated by Sethe, but most so with her stories, and while the stories about her past were painful to recount, Sethe still obliged and even found herself wanting to share her stories with Beloved (68). She shared stories from her past she had not even told Denver or Paul D – stories that she and Baby Suggs unspokenly had decided were "unspeakable" (68). Beloved asks Sethe about her "diamonds," reminding her of a pair of crystal earrings that had been given to her by Mrs. Garner as a wedding present (71). Surprised by the story she had never heard, Denver asked Sethe where the earrings were now, and Sethe falls silent after saying: "Gone… Long Gone" (71). Beloved later enquires about Sethe's mother. This too was a story that Denver had not heard. The details of this story were patchier than the one about her crystal earrings. Sethe recalls that her mother had once shown her where she had been branded and told Sethe that she was the only one remaining with that brand, should something happen to her and her face become unrecognizable Sethe could tell it was her by looking for the mark branded into her skin (72). We find out that Sethe's mother had been hanged, possibly lynched, and the only stories she had were from a wet nurse named Nan who had "only one good hand," which is probably why she took care of the children while the other women worked (73). Nan told young Sethe how her mother and she had both been at sea together and had been raped repeatedly by white crewmen (74). Sethe's mother had thrown all her children from the rapes over-board without even naming them; Sethe was the only one she kept (74). Sethe also remembers that Nan and her mother spoke the same language, a language she remembers once having understood but has no recollection of having had meaning in (74).

This is one of the most powerful statements the novel makes regarding the precarity of identity faced by black peoples in and after slavery. One could parallel this instance with a similar idea voiced by Léopold Sédar Senghor in his famous poem, "Prayer to Masks," where the poet's persona in the poem is confronted by the mask of his "panther-headed ancestor" and can only greet it in silence. He has lost the language in which he could have greeted his ancestor but has also found empowerment in the language of the colonizer to articulate his predicament. Unlike the colonially assimilated French poet of the Négritude movement, who would go on to become the first president of independent Senegal, Sethe has no language for her experiences. It is here that one may pose an intervention in postcolonial readings of works such as *Beloved*. Slavery, one might make the argument, despite a product of the colonial enterprise its victims never really were recognized by the colonial system itself. The Black Diaspora, especially in places such as the United States, left behind in the wake of the Transatlantic Slave Trade were never subjects of the European colonial powers that displaced them. Therefore, their postcoloniality is perforce different from the colonized subject who would later go on to claim sovereignty through varied processes of "decolonization." One simply cannot theorize the two in similar ways or approach them through corollary hermeneutic frames. The "cognitive task" of a "postcolonial identity" would look very different in contexts such as the Reconstruction in America. Sethe, a former fugitive slave living in Reconstruction America, represents in a larger sense the disremembered victims of colonization – the hotly contested sixty million and more to whom the novel is dedicated. I am not proposing a comparative or even a competitive victimology as Crouch suggested in his earlier mentioned review – in this case between possibly the colonized and the enslaved. I am, however, arguing that the "burden of memeory," to borrow from the title and sprit of Wole Soyinka's book: *The Burden of Memory and the Muse Forgiveness*, experienced in the two cases are starkly different, as is the

experience of remembrance itself. In the case of the women in 124 Bluestone Road, the burden of memory returns to haunt them as a physical corporeal entity. The muse of forgiveness comes in the form of the community of women who gather to exorcise Beloved from the house and Sethe's life. However, the claim to community is as much a claim from and of the community, and it is an act of necessity rather a cognition of identity.

When news gets out into the community that Sethe was being tormented by a woman they believed to be the daughter she had killed who had returned from the dead, the women in the community rally around Sethe and Denver to rescue them. Ella, a prominent figure in the community who along with Stamp Paid had played an active role in rescuing and harboring escaped slaves in the Underground Railroad, takes it upon herself to gather support in the community for Sethe and Denver. Her mind is made up when she hears the events from another woman in the community. In a conversation with Janey Wagon who had recently spoken to Denver, Ella concluded: "But nothing. What's fair ain't necessarily right. You can't just up and kill your children. No, and the children can't just up and kill the mama" (301). When the women confront Beloved on the porch of 124, standing beside Sethe; a beautiful, glistening-black and very pregnant woman, "smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun," what they in fact see is history, the uncanny glory of the figure of the black woman in slavery (308). The theme of motherhood running through the narrative comes full-circle in this moment, when Sethe whose problematic claim to motherhood is a driving force in the story and the pregnant Beloved are seen standing side-by-side. Sethe's own claims to motherhood are off-set, in the earlier part of the narrative, by Baby Suggs' tacit acceptance of a lack of maternal agency. Towards the beginning of the novel we see Baby Suggs telling Sethe, her daughter-in-law, that she should count her blessings, since she had

after all had time with three of her children. When Sethe had suggested to her mother-in-law that they move in order to escape the spite of the dead baby, Baby Suggs responds sagaciously:

> "'What'd be the point?' asked Baby Suggs. 'Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? Or yours? Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just on raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil.' Baby Suggs rubbed her eyebrows. 'My first-born. All I can remember is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember.'" (6).

Such a seemingly tacit acceptance no doubt caused her great private anguish. While talking to Paul D, Sethe recounts that Baby Suggs claimed having felt the passing of each one of her children, she had said Halle, Sethe's husband, had passed in 1855 the day Denver had been born (9). Baby Suggs, however, seems to have found a means to cope with the pain of her losses through her stoic approach to life. She seemed to find a strength in her suffering that only those who had abandoned all hope could find. In a certain sense she had made her peace with her absolute lack of agency, and the emotional energy that would have otherwise been spent in hoping for change or perseverating over her suffering, she channels into a uniquely powerful from of self-love. It is this stoic form of self-love that she preaches to the community that congregated around her in the clearing in the woods. She is able to bring much needed healing to the men, women and children who followed her into the clearing every Saturday afternoon (102). They shared laughter for the living and wept together for the dead, she was not preaching love for a higher God or consoling them with grace in lieu of their sufferings. The only "grace they could have," she preached, "was the grace they could imagine" (103).

> "'Here,' she said, 'in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they don't love your flesh. The despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O

> my people they don't love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off, and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you*!'" (103-104).

More than anything else Sethe struggles with loving herself, and unlike her mother-in-law she cannot seem to find peace. In the time after her arrival at 124 and until her painful and long drawn out demise, Baby Suggs was the only maternal figure Sethe had ever known. However, while she misses her deeply, Sethe also blames herself for Baby Suggs' "collapse" (105). Though absent from the immediate present of the novel, Baby Suggs represents one aspect of the past – the living past. Beloved represents the past of the dead and the disremembered and Sethe, who represents the present, struggles with an acceptance of both the living past and the dead past. She valued the comfort of Baby Suggs' wisdom, but also does not believe in the kind of passivity she saw in her view of life. When the living past passes to the realm of the dead, and the dead past is threatened with disremembrance, and reasserts its presence with a renewed vigor.

There are of course a variety of ways in which the characters in the narrative struggle with re-memory, but such a struggle manifests less within a context of laying claim to community and rather becomes a struggle with an of envisioning selfhood. As Morrison suggests in *Playing in the Dark* and more recently in *The Origin of Others*, selfhoods have always been formed around and in contradistinction to extant alterities. Specifically, in the context of "Americanness" as a signifier of an individual and collective national selfhood, such an identity it may be argued was first inscribed upon the Native peoples inhabiting the manifestly destined lands of the northern and southern Americas. And later, as Morrison argues, specifically in the context of the literary period often described as the "American Renaissance," when an American identity begins to manifest in the nation's literary cultures, the default "whiteness" of literary and cultural discourses around the mid-1800s, she argues, was more often predicated on the "dark" presence of the "unsettled and

unsettling" black other (Morrison, *Playing* 9, 33-35). Such an alterity, in one way or another and to varying degrees has permeated the works, she asserts, of authors such as Willa Cather, Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, Earnest Hemingway, etc. In such a context one would more immediately think of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in the same sense as one would say think of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in relation to a colonial depictions of Africa, as argued by Chinua Achebe in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." Quite in a similar sense, as Achebe argued in his critique of Conrad's novel, that the crisis at the heart of the narrative is not about Africa or the colonized other, but rather the crisis such an encounter with alterity poses within the consciousness and selfhood of a post-Enlightenment European colonizing Self. Going against a more traditional reading of racialized prejudices operational within works such as *Huckleberry Finn*, Morrison proposes an alternative reading that addresses the complexities within such works that present a "critique of class and race" and are often "enhanced or disguised by humor and naiveté" (54). She goes on to further argue that the perspective from which the narrative is focalized inscribes into a child's gaze, "a critique of slavery and the pretensions of the would-be middle class, a resistance to the loss of Eden and the difficulty of becoming a social individual" (55). It is exactly such a constant interplay between enslavement and freedom within historical processes of social individuation that Morrison argues previous readings of such narratives seem to miss.

No doubt the American Renaissance, as we know, is conceptually speaking a retrospective and retroactive categorical, however, as Morrison like several other scholars such as F.O. Matthiessen and later David S. Reynolds identify the period preceding the American Civil War was one of significant literary production. Reylonds, for example, responds directly to Matthiessen's previous work – particularly his claims regarding the strong Elizabethan influences

on early American literature. Reynolds, while not denying the "anxieties" of such influence, also argues that it was around this very period a "national" American literature begins to emerge in direct response to the specific socio-cultural and political milieu of pre-Civil War America (Reynolds 4-7). The intervention that Morrison's readings pose in such a historical context of social, cultural and political national individuation is an understanding that alongside such movements towards self-realization and actualization there always existed a substratum upon which such collectivities of selfhoods are built. Such a substratum that is comprised of selfhoods otherwise than the ones being consolidated, namely the Other, becomes a site for the imaginaries of such collective selfhoods. As she states, "The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom – if it did not in fact create it – like slavery" (38).

In the last chapter of *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison states: "… I remain convinced that the metaphorical and metaphysical uses of race occupy definitive places in American literature, in the 'national' character, and ought to be a major concern in the literary scholarship that tries to know it" (63). Therefore, I would argue that her works are an exploration of precisely such historical sites for social and cultural imaginaries that are predicated on the presences of racial and ethnic others. So, in this regard I would agree with Mohanty's analysis of an ontological epistemic claim within Sethe's narrative in *Beloved*, however, such an agreement can only extend to the question of a possibility or rather an impossibility for ontological individuation. I return once again to the historical context that Morrison intentionally chooses for the setting of her narrative in *Beloved*. It pushes the question DuBois articulates even further to actually attempt feeling what it was like to be "a problem." What sense of self could the "problem" have around whom a national identity was being Reconstructed following the American Civil War?

The question that concludes Sethe's narrative only reinforces the painful struggle of forging or claiming such a selfhood. Everything seems in order as we move towards the close of the narrative in *Beloved*. The community of women band around Sethe to exorcise Beloved from her life and from 124. Denver seems to have found a new sense of confidence and is quicker to assert herself in protecting her mother. When Sethe is incapacitated by the overwhelming task of rememorying and is being consumed by wanting to making amends to Beloved, who she is now convinced was the daughter she had killed returned from the dead, Denver assumes responsibility for the household, caring for both Sethe and Beloved (Morrison *Beloved* 295-296). The past returns to Denver as well, in the form of Baby Suggs' voice, but instead of debilitating her, it gives her strength to care for her mother and seek the help they needed from the community of women in the town (293). We learn that she "might go to Oberlin" to study, get a degree and have a career. In the same conversation she also implicitly reprimands Paul D for running away from them when things started to get difficult with Beloved, and conveys to him that she felt she had "lost her mother" to the trauma that Beloved had inflicted on them, and that he should not stop by to see Sethe unless he planned on staying and doing right by her (314-15). The sense of self-confidence that Denver now seems to exude, is a stark contrast to Sethe who seems tired and sickly. Hence when Paul D manages to muster up the strength and courage to go to see Sethe, he is filled with concern (320). Less than half-way into a conversation she says to him that she was tired, and she needed to rest, and Paul D promises to stay and take care of her (320). Towards the end of the narrative, Paul D is holding Sethe as she cries, he feels "too many things" about her, and is reminded of what Sixo, one of the fellow-slaves at Sweet Home had said about the "Thirty-Mile-Woman" whom he used to secretly go to meet: "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you

know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind" (321). He wants to speak to her about a future that they could possibly share together, he says to her: "…me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow," he further tries to comfort her and assures her, "You your best thing, Sethe. You are," as he holds her hands (322). All Sethe is able to say in response is: "Me? Me" (322)?

The narrative ends here, leaving the reader with many uncertainties, but also with a hope for possibilities. However, the questioning tone of such a positing of selfhood, leaves us wondering whether what Sethe says in response is her way of claiming a self or a questioning of the possibility for such a claim. At several points in the narrative Sethe asserts that her children were her "best part." For example, when confronted by Paul D about having killed her child, Sethe responded by saying that she took her babies and put them "where they'd be safe" (193). The moment of Beloved's exorcism from 124, also echoes the earlier moment in the novel when Sethe has put her children, "where they'd be safe," by attempting to kill them. The parallels between Mr. Bodwin's passing through the neighborhood as the women gather to save Sethe from Beloved and the moment when Sethe killed her "already crawling" infant when Schoolteacher came to reclaim them are clearly emphasized. Sethe mistakes Mr. Bodwin for Schoolteacher and lunges at him with an icepick. This suggests a change in Sethe, unlike the last time when she chose to inflict violence on her children – the threatened, she instead attacks what she perceives as the threat. Secondly, these are the only two instances in the whole narrative told from a white character's perspective. The section leading up to the dénouement when we see Sethe clutching the limp body of the baby whose throat she had just slit, begins with the arrival of Schoolteacher, his nephew, a slave catcher and a sheriff, described as the "four horsemen" (174-75). This was in effect the beginning of the end. The perspective becomes subtly clear as we move through the passage

seeing, “Six or seven Negroes” walking up the road towards 124, or “A crazy old nigger” who was “standing in the woodpile with an ax,” and we knew he “was crazy right off because he was grunting—making low cat noises” (175). While Schoolteacher walks away from the shed after seeing Sethe clutching the bleeding infant corpse, because he realized that, “there was nothing there to claim,” the nephew who had nursed Sethe’s breasts during one of the “experiments” Schoolteacher routinely carried out on the slaves in Sweet Home, was left visibly perturbed by what had been witnessed. He could not understand why Sethe would have done such a thing. What had pushed her to such a point of madness?

> “The nephew, the one who had nursed her, his brother held her down, didn’t know he was shaking. His uncle had warned him against that kind confusion, but the warning didn’t seem to be taking. What did she go and do that for? On account of a beating? Hell, he’d been beat a million times and he was white. Once it hurt so bad and made him so mad he’d smashed the well bucket. Another time he took it out on Samson—a few tossed rocks was all. But no beating ever made him… I mean no way he could have… What she go and do that for? And that’s what he asked the sheriff, who was standing there amazed like the rest of them, but not shaking. He was swallowing hard, over and over again. ‘What she want to go and do that for?’” (176-77).

The entire scene ending with Baby Suggs saying, “I beg your pardon. Lord, I beg your pardon. I sure do,” to the two white children who bring her some shoes to mend, only emphasizes the intense loneliness of the women in 124 (180). In the entire narrative, Baby Suggs is perhaps the only person in Sethe’s life who could not condemn the action she took that day. Both Stamp Paid and Paul D judged her in their own ways, and what the former could not quite articulate the latter did, reminding Sethe how many feet she walked on (195). Sethe’s “barbarous” act had somehow proven, at least in their minds, the allegedly inherent barbarity of black peoples – the kind of confusion that Schoolteacher had warned his nephew of – to not be fooled into thinking that they were human. For, Paul D the question is a bit more complex, he could not understand how Sethe, a breeding slave woman in a plantation, could have learnt to love with such ferocity – her love was

"too thick," he concluded (193). Ella too had judged Sethe's actions, as evidenced by her response to Janey when she tells her about Sethe being haunted by her dead daughter: "What's fair ain't necessarily right. You can't just up and kill your children" (301). As she later reflects, that while she had understood Sethe's rage in the shed that afternoon when Schoolteacher came to reclaim her and her children into slavery, but she could not condone Sethe's actions (302).

Hence when the community does band together to "save" Sethe, they do so, perhaps, more as a matter of principle, rather than empathy for Sethe's plight. Ella, like the rest of the community responds to Sethe's predicament, in resisting the "lowest yet," and this meant something different to each of them (302). So, while Mohanty's arguments that the interrelated teloi of actualizations of self and community are instrumental narrative forces in *Beloved*, might be fraught, but they are not entirely incorrect. However, it is not a claim to such actualizations, but rather the troubled nature and near impossibilities of such a laying of claim that form the motive forces in *Beloved*. The incident that alienated Sethe from the community was also the event that broke Baby Suggs' spirit, and that was perhaps the one thing Sethe felt remorse for – "I cannot forget that what I did changed Baby Suggs' life" (217). When she had preached in the clearing in the woods, Baby Suggs the holy preached a gospel of radical "self-love." This was not an articulation of one's inherent human worth, per se, it was quite simply that if one was so abjected and deracinated by the world outside as the formerly enslaved were in America at the time, then the only love or "grace" one could have was only that which one could "imagine" (103). The ritual she presided over in that clearing, was an acknowledgement of suffering and the pain and grief such a suffering had caused. She asked those gathered there to sing, dance, and cry, until singing, dancing and crying all melded into one experience of feeling – emotions that they would usually not allow themselves to feel (103). Words were of no use there, not because each and everyone who came to the clearing did

not have an understanding of what had happened to them in slavery, but rather because language falls horribly short in the articulation of such knowledge. Therefore, yet again, if there were a claim to epistemology here, it would have to be imagined differently. Baby Suggs, Sethe later reflects, had stopped preaching because she believed, "*they* had won" (217). Who were they and how had they won?

When Baby Suggs first truly experiences her freedom from slavery, it comes with the realization that the hands before her were indeed her own, they no longer labored for another, and this was also when she felt her heart beating for the first time (166). The fact that her freedom, the freedom her son Halle had toiled so hard to buy for her, was in fact so fragile that four white men on horsebacks could come into the yard of a house she now called home and undo it, was certainly one of the things that broke her spirit. However, why does this incident cause her to stop preaching? There is a greater symbolism and significance in such a vindication of power. *They*, those who wielded power over the lives of the formerly enslaved, had won not just in the exercise of the power they possessed, but also in the inflicting of it. Baby Suggs stopped preaching, as she kept repeating to Stamp Paid, because *they* came in her yard (211). She was not saying the "whitefolks won," rather she was saying that she had lost. She could not succeed in building a community in that town. Such a failure is foreshadowed in the lavish feast she threw shortly after Sethe's arrival at 124, where she had "offended" her friends and neighbors "by excess" – she had overstepped and the bounty she offered the townsfolk was seen as a reckless display of generosity and was misconstrued by them as "uncalled for pride" (162-163). *They* had won, because as we recall the townsfolk had seen the four horsemen riding into town and everybody had to have known that it could have meant one thing and one thing only. Yet, nobody warned Baby Suggs or Sethe of their arrival, and not that it would have made a difference, because *they* always would have won. The

intense solitude that echoes in her voice, when Baby Suggs begs pardon at the end of the incident, as she took in the shoes from the white children to mend and as that cart carrying Sethe creaked out of sight, is one that points to the failure to form community. She realizes that they, the now formerly enslaved, would always remain enslaved some way or the other. Hence, she gives up the fight and as she says chooses to "fix on something harmless in the world" (211).

While Baby Suggs, seems to suffer from an incapacity for action, Sethe suffers from an incapacity for contemplation. She cannot bear to confront her "rememory," and so when Beloved ask her about "her diamonds; the crystal earrings she had received from Mrs. Garner or about her mother, Sethe hurt with every mention of her "past life," because these were things that she and Baby Suggs had unspeakingly agreed were "unspeakable" (69). We learn of Sethe's past through other characters who serve as instruments to her rememory, but until the arrival of Beloved, her acts of rememory are selective. When Denver asks about the story of her birth, for example, she only reveals as much as she likes, and Denver too only focus on the parts that pertain to her own sense of a narrative selfhood. However, with the arrival of Paul D shortly followed by Beloved's appearance, her rememory becomes increasingly fraught, she is forced to recall a past that she has willfully disremembered in the interests of her own survival and those of her children. Even when she is haunted, as she, Baby Suggs and Denver believe, by the ghost of her dead baby she is able to make her peace with that too. Even though she is able to reason through her actions she never confronts their true weight. Whether it be the killing of her baby or later in effect prostituting herself in order to give her dead child a gravestone, the only reasoning she is capable of offering is that she did what needed to be done. It is only with the arrival of Beloved and her subsequent recognition as her murdered child returned from the dead, does Sethe feel the need to wholly explain her actions. The explanation she tries to provide Beloved is different from the one she

gives Paul D, it one that perhaps only Baby Suggs understood, which is perhaps why she is the only character in the novel who cannot bring herself to judge Sethe for her actions – Baby Suggs who had quietly felt and grieved the passing of each of her eight children.

In the three monologues that form a sort of narrative climax in the second part of the novel, each of the three women living in 124 at the time, give voice to their feelings. Morrison plays on the themes of both a spiritual and temporal trinity in this section: the present, future and past, and also a feminine trinity of mother, daughter and the eternal black feminine spirit in all its terrifying glory. It is for the very first time in her monologue that she makes mention of how beautiful her already crawling baby girl was, the feeling of holding her and how she had struggled and fought to get to her because she still had milk for her (236-238). When she speaks to Paul D, she never wanted for him to understand her actions, or even care if he did. She knew she had done the right thing. However, with Beloved, while she does not waver on the rightness of her action, she wants Beloved to understand exactly why she did it:

> "I'll tell Beloved about that; she'll understand. She is my daughter. The one I managed to have milk for, and to get it to her even after they stole it; after they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay with the horses. But I wasn't too nasty to cook their food or take care of Mrs. Garner. I tended her like I would have tended my own mother if she needed me. If they had let her out the rice field, because I was the one she didn't throw away" (237).

One might surmise, that this is the "cognitive task" that Mohanty speaks of, however, should it become the basis of an "epistemology," such a cognition would require both sustenance and permanence. While the three monologues, meld into one poetic harmony, with both Sethe and Denver laying a relational claim to Beloved: "You are my sister. You are my daughter," the claim Beloved stakes is of a different order, "You are my face; you are me" (255). The extended poetic back and forth between the women within the confines of 124 ends with three repetitions of the

phrase, “You are mine” (256). However, the impermanence of such a resolution is foreshadowed in what Stamp Paid hears from outside as he approaches the door, described as “recognizable but undecipherable” (235). 124 has to lock out the outside world for the “women inside” to be “free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their mind” (235). Shortly after such a seemingly final resolution, we become aware of the cost that such a resolution comes at. Staying locked in the house, Sethe stops going to work to take care of Beloved, and at the start of section three, “124 was quiet” (281). Denver, who in her many years of solitude, thought she knew all there was to know about silence, learnt a new form of silence, she was “surprised to know hunger could do that: quiet you down and wear you out” (281). Sethe becomes increasingly preoccupied with Beloved trying to make up for lost time, and anything Beloved demanded she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, “Beloved invented desire” (283). Sethe kept trying to make amends and reassure Beloved that she had no intention of abandoning her, and when reasoning failed she pleaded for her forgiveness, however, Beloved was not interested in Sethe’s explanations or pleased by Sethe’s efforts, she continued to obsess over her own sense and experiences of abandonment (284). Meanwhile, Denver was the only one who noticed the ruin that such a codependent obsession was bringing upon the household, but more importantly how her mother’s obsession with Beloved was gradually eroding Sethe, she noticed how the skin between her mother’s forefinger and thumb was “thin as china silk” (281).

From the very start of the third section it becomes clear that this is Denver’s section in the narrative – she is the protagonist here and it is ultimately her intervention that leads to Beloved’s eventual exorcism from their lives. We see a progression of agency across the three generations of women in 124 starting with Baby Suggs and culminating in Denver. While Denver may have been moved to act through a rememory of Baby Suggs, but she and Sethe share a crucial narrative

experience, and that is the stories of their births. While Denver realizes the significance of the story of her birth, the greater significance lies in the fact that of all of Sethe's children she was the only one born in freedom. For Sethe her incredibly ferocious need to mother her children comes from the realization that she was the only child her mother kept. More importantly, however, she knew from Nan's retellings of the story that she was born of love. If one considers this fact, then Sethe's desires, her desire for a wedding and a marriage that Mrs. Garner is both startled by and indulges or her love for her children that Paul D finds "too thick," seem less farfetched. There is often a common understanding which suggests that Sethe desires such things for herself, because she sees white people having them. When Paul D says that her love was too thick, he is most surprised by the fact that Sethe spoke of love and baby clothes like "any other woman," while also knowing fully well that what she talked about could "cleave the bone" (193). Her desire for love and marriage came from the knowledge that she was born of love, as did her desire to mother her children. The despair and desperation in the case of the latter came from the fact, as echoed in Harper's poem, that she did not have a mother's right over her own children. Her own mother had kept her but could not mother her, Baby Suggs could not hold on to any of her children, and so Sethe was determined to keep her own, whom she would birth out of and into love and would keep safe at any cost. It is the circumstances around their birthing and raising that limits and threatens her ability to mother her children. Every time she speaks of being violated behind the stables at Sweet Home by Schoolteacher's nephews, while he observed and took notes – when she was held down as one of the nephews suckled her breasts, Sethe's greatest outrage is the fact that they stole her milk. It was after this one unforgivable offence that she got all the more determined to escape Sweet Home:

> "Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else – and the one time I did it was took from me – they held me

> down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby. Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left" (236).

However, as Morrison has repeatedly stated in response to being asked about how Sethe's actions in the novel, mirrored the life of the historical Margaret Garner, that while killing her child was the right thing to do she did not have the right to do it – in more senses than one. Therefore, since a court of law could not pass judgment on whether or not it was her right, the only source for such a judgement could lie with the child she killed – enter Beloved.

It becomes easy to lose sight of Beloved's purpose after Denver is galvanized into action in the third section of the novel. Any sense of a tomorrow that we have at the end of the narrative is in Denver's future. Denver being the only character in the novel who is born into freedom, embodied the possibility of a life that awaited the now emancipated slave – a potential fulfilling of the promise made by the Reconstruction. Beloved on the other hand, if we are to regard her as Sethe's murdered child returned from the dead, is an embodiment of the slave-past. If we think in terms of the interplay of temporalities Morrison sets up in the narrative, Sethe is positioned liminal to both the past and the future and represents the historical present of a life after slavery. The apparent path to the future seems to be both determined and deterministic. Quite simply, the past must be exorcised in order to make room for progress. The present on the other hand struggles with constant visitations from the past. For Sethe, while having to rememory her life in Sweet Home with Paul D's arrival is perhaps slightly mitigated by the seemingly shared nature of such a past, the task of rememory initiated by Beloved's arrival becomes increasingly harrowing. Similarly, for Paul D when Beloved accosts him in the shed behind 124, she serves as an instrument for his rememory. Beloved insists that he call her by her name, and when he does, the two end up

in an awkward sexual encounter at the end of which the tobacco tin that had been rusted shut bursts open, as he chants to himself, "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart" (138). While Sethe had all but managed to erase her memories, Paul D as he had earlier explained to Sethe locked away all his memories in a tobacco tin, everything that if recollected would have "yanked" him back into the enslaved life he shut away in that tin box which he held close to chest in lieu of a heart (84, 86). He could not reveal the contents of it to Sethe, because he was ashamed and felt she would think less of him (86). The symbolic bursting open of that box, becomes the beginning of Paul D's own journey for coming to terms with his past, before he can contemplate a future with Sethe.

Therefore, while Beloved serves as an instrument to "rememory" for the other characters in the novel, we never know anything about her own life before her arrival at 124. Here if one was to think of Beloved as not a supernatural corporeal force from the past, but an embodied flesh and blood woman then the story takes on a wholly different dimension. Who was she? Where did she come from? Why was she so hungry for memories? Was it because she had lost all memories of her own? As Paul D and Stamp Paid later speculate, she could have been an escaped captive on the run who had been traumatized and sought shelter in the first place she found (276-277). When the women who come to rescue Sethe see her on the porch outside 124, stark naked, pregnant and glistening in the afternoon sun, they see something familiar but too horrifying to recognize. If we consider the context of the women's lives who had all escaped slavery, in that form Beloved was the physical embodiment of all black women in slavery – breeders of future slaves and instruments for the perpetuation of the system of slavery itself. They did not, however, want to see that and so they resolved:

> "The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunder-

> black and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling" (308).

This is the last we see of Beloved, standing alone on the porch smiling as Sethe runs away from her into the crowd of women outside 124 who were singing and chanting, "A hill of black people, falling" (309). What became of her after this moment we never find out. Who was the "man without skin" raising his whip, looking at her as Sethe ran away from her? Why did she want Sethe's face? Who had taken hers away? Who or what was the "hot thing" that she had come looking for when she first appeared? We never arrive at the answers to these questions. As the epilogue to the novel suggests, her memory simply fades over time, and all recognition of her vanishes but never entirely. Over time she becomes an entity that exists without and beyond signification – a sign emptied of its signifier and signified: "Just weather. No clamor for a kiss" (324).

So, while the story for the novel's narrative may have been inspired by the historical Margaret Garner, of whom Sethe is a literarization, the question at the heart of the novel's narrative is tied to its eponymous protagonist. Sethe's actions, like Margaret Garner's are no doubt hermeneutically inexhaustible by any theoretical lens we might have at our disposal, however, what is truly ineffable and equally horrifying is the question that comes from beyond the realm of the living – from those who are willfully and actively disremembered so that a future might be made possible. Contextually interpreted, such a question pertains to the past and how the power of a horrific past must be exorcised in the present for the possibility of a future. This does not mean the past dies a quiet death, it comes back in a variety of ways to haunt the present, precisely because systems remain constant, systems of differential valuations that define the nature of collectivities, which in turn are secured at the cost of those designated as lying outside the definitions of such categories. The sobering fact remains that the very systems that generated genocidal pasts continue

to be operational in the present. Beloved is a reminder of such past and all those systemic forces, and the fact that she must be exorcised to secure a future, be that the future that awaits Denver or the seemingly less certain future that Sethe seems incapable of seeing, points to the almost insurmountable power the past exerts upon one's present. In the specific case of the African American subject, Morrison perhaps comments on the insurmountable cognitive task of identity. In the larger context of an American nationhood, as she has argued in works such as *Playing in the Dark* and *The Origin of Others*, that figure of Beloved standing naked and pregnant on the porch outside 124 represents the abjected Other upon and in contradistinction to whom an American nationhood was founded. As Zizek commented not too long ago in relation to the role of typologies in the sustaining of systematicities:

> "In the rejection of the social welfare system by the New Right in the us, for example, the universal notion of the welfare system as inefficient is sustained by the pseudo-concrete representation of the notorious African-American single mother, as if, in the last resort, social welfare is a programme for black single mothers—the particular case of the 'single black mother' is silently conceived as 'typical' of social welfare and of what is wrong with it."[19]

And as bell hooks would go on to argue in the earlier mentioned essay, "Eating the Other," the Other is consumed within collectivities of the "mainstream" through precisely such typologies. Such a consumed Other is in effect attenuated. Such an Other can exist within a proximal exclusion or even an inclusion within ontologically defined collectivities of the Self. Therefore, while we may be "thrown" by a Nanibala, as seen in the case of Tagore's *Chaturanga* or be disturbed by Sethe's killing of her own child in *Beloved*, we can also find ways to explain away the exteriority of their actions. The abject on the other hand, does not allow for its exteriority to be explained away, and what differentiates the abject from the Other is that we are complicit, either through

[19] https://newleftreview.org/issues/I225/articles/slavoj-zizek-multiculturalism-or-the-cultural-logic-of-multinational-capitalism

action or inaction, discursively or otherwise, in the abject's abjection. The abject is not, as Levinas suggests, "the Being's other," the abject is as Frantz Fanon would describe in *Black Skin White Masks,* "Non-Being." If as Levinas suggests, the fundamental attribute of the Stranger is his "freedom," then the abject is a Stranger bereft and robbed of all freedom. Herein lies my fundamental disagreement with a reading of cognitive endeavorings, ontologies and moral epistemologies into a narrative such as *Beloved*.

The abjected Other presents an additional demand in an ethics towards alterity, which is tied to the circumstances of their state of abjection – a exteriority denied both its temporality and infinity. It is not co-opted into a temporality of the Self, at least not entirely. It is however tied to an ontology otherwise than itself, in that it forms the substratum to such ontologies. The challenge therefore is not one that can be answered through moral epistemologies. The time of the Other is the future, it is to come. The temporality of the abject is the past. At best, it can haunt the present. The abject is an Other, but one who has been robbed of their temporality. The abjected is not being outside of or beyond time, but rather being without time. It is the absolute impossibility of transcendence. The realm of abjection is not the impossibility for knowledge, it is rather encountering the horror of that which one does not want to know: the realm of things that Baby Suggs and Sethe had unpeakingly decided were "unspeakable" or the terrifying task of caring for Pecola Breedlove's baby who dies from being born too prematurely. The question, therefore, for the humanities and humanity today may still be that of the Other, however, the question that we have repeatedly failed to even address let alone answer, that will come to "re-bite," to borrow Michel de Certeau's phrasing, is that of the abject. And this will not be a question that we will be able to epistemologically theorize away. When in a future time that will be our present then, should the cries of the billions who have and continue to be deracinated and abjected resound, to borrow

from Paul Célan's poetry yet again, "Pray to us, Lord. We are near," in truth all we would have to offer would indeed be prayer. However, it is also true that this may be unlikely, and especially so in the near future. As Steiner says, the truth of the *Shoah* was embodied in the silence of the "so called *Muselmänner*" who could never truly be liberated from the death camps, and only silence can "aspire to the lost dignity of meaning" (Steiner, *Poetry* 197). So, for the time being, perhaps we continue to ponder questions of difference. We can hope that in that indeterminate future time, which shall then be our present, should we come *face-to-face* with such an abjected signing Other, we are able to overcome the need to exorcise its presence and despite the fear and trembling it causes in the very cores of our beings, we are able to submit to such a *face* in silence. In prayer. It is perhaps in preparation of such a future eventuality, that moral and ethical contemplations have an unprecedented significance within praxes and practices of humanism and the humanities today.

CONCLUSION

"*Where do Old Birds go to Die?"*

> "At magic hour; when the sun has gone but the light has not, armies of flying foxes unhinge themselves from the Banyan trees in the old graveyard and drift across the city like smoke. When the bats leave, the crows come home. Not all the din of their homecoming fills the silence left by the sparrows that have gone missing, and the old white-backed vultures, custodians of the dead for more than a hundred million years, that have been wiped out. The vultures. The vultures died of diclofenac poisoning. Diclofenac, cow aspirin, given to cattle as a muscle relaxant, to ease pain and increase the production of milk. Each chemically relaxed, milk-producing cow or buffalo that died become poisoned vulture bait. As cattle turned into better dairy machines, as the city ate more ice cream, butterscotch-crunch, nutty-buddy and chocolate-chip, as it drank more mango milkshake, vultures' necks began to droop as though they were tired and simply could not stay awake. Silver beads of saliva dripped from their beaks, and one by one they tumbled off their branches, dead.
>
> Not many noticed the passing of the friendly old birds.
>
> There was so much else to look forward to"
>
> - *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Arundhati Roy (2017).*

The idea that this present work culminates in, attempts at signifying a demand the *face* makes of me when I am faced by it. I am, therefore, forced to contemplate the sometimes-unbearable interminability of such inquiries. I also am strangely reminded of an image, a sign, that fascinated me for some reason since before I can even actually remember seeing it. It was a gold bangle; a golden ouroboros, shown with a dull luster that only years of wear can bring, circling a familiar wrist – both loving and beloved. Having since read up on the symbology of the image and encountered references and depictions of it in several literary texts, I still cannot put my finger on what exactly fascinates me about it. I cannot claim or offer an assurance of certitude for meaning in this image from my pre-memory the way, say Dickenian protagonist would. Neither can I lay claim to a germ of genius in my pre-cognitive infancy the way Mr. Copperfield seemed capable of

doing. I can only state that something in that sign, has always moved me. As have questions such as the ones that Arundhati Roy inaugurates her latest novel with. Beginning, therefore with my initial inquiries: as humanists, many of the questions we find ourselves pondering, usually existential in nature, are often questions that cannot be answered or do not have answers. I too often find myself pondering the fate of all living creatures alike – the old friendly birds who are all dead, the missing sparrows who seem to have vanished mysteriously and unnoticed and the cattle who end up as poisoned vulture bait. I also find myself pondering a possible eschatology for the planet we all call home, and the fact that there are an unimaginable number of people for whom this home has little to no room. I also wonder what responsibility do we who have room in this home, have towards those who do not – does our having of room in a sense make us beholden to those who do not? Do we not ponder such questions, because they cannot be answered? Is it that they cannot be answered or that there is no answer, or is it that what might present itself as an answer is all too overwhelming or terrifying? Moreover, who is it terrifying for and why?

This work, in a sense then, is less about what is or has been written, both in it and before it, and more about that which is not, has not or cannot be written about. These are not things necessarily beyond language, but rather things that cannot be exhausted in and by language. More specifically, this work is most concerned with what Ricoeur has identified as the prophetic capacity inherent within studies and endeavors in the sphere of humanism. How do we as humanists today, respond to not just the demands made by our practices and praxes today, but also anticipate the nature and import of future demands? Can a knowledge of the past and a consciousness of the present then truly prepare us for an anticipation of the future? Can a recovery of forgotten pasts, save experientialities being forgotten in the present? The seeming incapacity in language to address such inquires does not stem from some meta-phenomenality or a meta-discursive quality that one

might ascribe to them. These are inquiries firmly grounded in the phenomenal worlds we inhabit. The discomfort lies elsewhere. It perhaps lies in what becomes the object of a phenomenology of disrememberance. Such a disremembering is not always willful, nor does it stem from some deep-seated malintent. In yet other occasions, such disremembering is essential to surviving one's conditions being in the world. What does one mean by such a concatenation of statements? To use the example from the passage quoted from the start of Roy's novel, one does not usually think of poisoned cows while one is enjoying an ice cream or a milkshake. The example might seem banal or even facetious, but it reflects an essential structurality of being in the world that is perhaps felt at times with increasingly greater intensity today. Late last year I remember reading a number projected by the United Nations Human Rights Commission, it was the number of globally deracinated peoples. The UNHRC estimated that 70.8 million peoples in the world live stateless and in deracination.[20] This seems like a small number in the larger scheme of things where the world's population is now estimated at over seven billion – a mere 1 percent, however the report also emphasized that the number is ever-growing and at the end of 2019 was alarmingly high. As Nick Cumming-Bruce of the *New York Times* reports in June 2019, the number of people fleeing conflict in 2019 far exceeded and was the highest recorded since World War II. Cumming-Bruce also reports that nearly eighty percent of these displaced peoples have been living in statelessness for over five years, and that nearly over half that number is comprised of children.[21]

What is to become of these children? As Kristeva reflects in the *Power of Horror*, upon looking at glass cases at the museum in Auschwitz and spotting in midst of greying and browning old shoes that belonged to the victims of the death camps, spotting what seems like a small dull

[20] https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html
[21] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/19/world/refugees-record-un.html

flash of colour; shoes or a doll that might have belonged to a child. The sight fills one with an inexplicable sense of what she describes as "abjection," however, one cannot inhabit such a feeling interminably. This is perhaps why one either actively or passively chooses to disremember. As Kristeva argues that such a sense of abjection reaches its apex in "Nazi crime," when "death" interrupts what in one's "living universe" should supposedly save one from an acknowledgement of death that eventually kills one. She says childhood and science among other things give a sense of security in the face of death, because nothing apparently terrifies Being as much as the terminality of its temporality. I choose to read such a moment in slightly different terms. I think of what such a terminality means in terms of a possible relationship that may exists between Being and its Other. I am of course borrowing from, as seen in the preceding analyses, a lexicon that Levinas provides for contemplations of that which is otherwise than Being. What Levinas provides us with is a radical counter-phenomenology that questions any and all epistemic premises located in a centrality of an ontic Being or collectivity of beings. Why does one call this a counter-phenomenology? Now, before it be pointed out to me, as it often is, I am not a philosopher. I would not arrogate a comprehensive knowledge or understanding of that which is disciplinarily designated as the study of philosophy in the academy today. However, as scholar and researcher with a training in the humanities and specifically in the study of literature, I would make the case that all of us endeavoring within humanistic scholarship have always done so on the basis of a philosophical substratum. The difference particularly in our practices today, is that there is and perhaps needs to be a greater consciousness of such philosophical substrata. In my own work, and in those whose works I draw most heavily from, one cannot, for example, speak of ethics within practices of humanism and the humanities without addressing questions of moral philosophy, and

one cannot therefore begin to contemplate moral philosophy without first examining the configurations of Being and those through which being in the world is made possible.

As it follows from the principle inquiry in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, one begins with "being" before one can contemplate "being in," and only then can one arrive at "being in the world" (Heidegger, *Being* 54). It is precisely such a concatenation that Levinas takes exception to, because in the final analysis "being in the world" for Heidegger finds ultimate resolution in the interiority of *Dasein* – the determinate presence of Being. Such is the existential "modality" of being in the world when it "requires a *prior* interpretation" in a compounded nature of *Dasein* which is in effect Being in Time or alternatively the Being's attribute of temporality (62). What Levinas contests is precisely such "a *prior* interpretation" which essentially prefigures being in the world in *Dasein*. Especially if one thinks of being in the world as a mode or modality for relationality, what such a prefiguration fails to recognize is what Ricoeur would define in *Oneself as Another* as the fundamental duality, if not plurality, of a subject's being in the world. Should the subject's being begin with identification, Ricouer would argue, then such an identification of selfhood carries within it implicitly an identification of otherness, because linguistically speaking, if an act of identification is also an act of communication, then the identifying addresser would, even unwittingly so, have an identified addressee (Ricoeur *Oneself* 27). Of course, Ricoeur is no doubt addressing the larger historical contemplations of the nature of Reality and the configurations through which a subject's habitation within it are defined in Continental thought, as evidenced by his repeated references to concepts of being/Being in Descartes and Kant that can be traced back to as early as the pre-socratic thinkers on one end and all the way through existentialism and phenomenology on the other. However, if one is to read a postulation such as the one Ricoeur makes in regard to the signifying "I" that signifies its identity, in linguistic terms alone, one can

glean significant moral implications to the condition of being in the world, it is less a matter of being "thrown" into rather than a process of inhabiting, and inhabiting then also signifies cohabiting. One inhabits reality through processes of cohabitation, because as he later argues, "Recognizing oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by*" (121). It is at this point in the work that Ricoeur begins to flesh out the *ipse* and *idem* aspects of any form of identification, which then explains the relationality proposed in the title of the work *Oneself as Another*. Being is simultaneously present here and there, in the sense that one is never exclusively identifier or identified, one is always both, and such a composite duality of being is a direct consequence of being in the world as being predicated on a simultaneity of inhabitation and cohabitation.

Such an understanding of being in the world, presents a rather optimistic alternative to configurations of alterity as the "aporetic," "spectral" or "trace." When I first encountered both Levinas and Ricoeur, what they had to offer was a much welcomed change from the more seemingly moribund view of an overwhelming inaccessibility of the Other – the legacy of postmodernity that seems to sometimes be founded on the interminable and insurmountable existential alienation of beings from one another. An existential alienation that in its apparently brighter or lighter moments forms the basis for individual genius, albeit a lonely one. The possibility of "being towards" rather than being in or being among, that Levinas repeatedly posits across works such as *Existing without Existents*, *Time and the Other*, *Totality and Infinity*, *Humanism of the Other* and *Otherwise than Being*, seemed to be a rather attractive prospect in contrast to a constant back and forth between the possibilities and impossibilities for epistemologies of the Other. While reading *Otherwise than Being* in particular, and later while re-reading *Totality and Infinity*, I was reminded of the story of Muhammad's "First Revelation," or at least the version of it that I had heard growing up, as the idea of "revelation" itself corresponds

to two concepts in Levinas' philosophy. The first is the concept of "saying" that he repeatedly returns to in *Otherwise than Being* and second the capacity that only the "absolutely foreign" possesses to instruct that he emphasizes in *Totality and Infinity*.

As the story goes, Muhammad was on retreat in the cave of Hira in the mountains near Mecca, when on one night the angel Jibreel appeared before him and commanded him to read. In the version I heard the angel appears before him and commands him to read, and when Muhammad failed to read, Jibreel embraced him fiercely until near suffocation, released him and commanded him to read again. In accordance with the mythic rule of threes, this happened two more times, until Muhammad submitted to the angel and admitted that he was unable to do what was being asked of him. It was only then that the angel of God recited the *surah* to him that began with: "Read in the name of your Lord…" The story of this first revelation is in many ways foundational to the religion itself. The word Islam understood etymologically in Arabic signifies the active participle form of submission. Hence, until Muhammad submitted, he could not receive the revelation. If we think of God as Levinas does in several of his works as the ultimate alterity, then one submits as an act of faith. In several mystic traditions across the world, the moment of surrender to a divine godhead is seen as a moment of liberation. The moment of surrender, then as Levinas states in *Otherwise than Being*, is one possible resolution to the "ultimate question" regarding "existence or non-existence" (Levinas, *Otherwise* 94). The moment of surrender is when one ceases to put stock in such questionings. One no longer seeks confirmation of presence, and perhaps it is such acts of faith that make redundant the need for knowledge, empirical or otherwise. Surrender then, perhaps, becomes the ultimate expression of desire, the ultimate form of being toward the ultimate Desired – the absolutely Other.

There is of course equally a seeming unease with such a seamless transference between the *face* as Levinas uses the term and the idea of divinity. One could not with equal certitude assert either way of the *face* in Levinas' conception of a moral philosophy – it is in the final analysis defined by its unqualifiablity. What I take away from such a seemingly purposeful reluctance to qualify the *face*, is that one cannot associate a causality with being towards another, in as much as one is not called upon to be towards another as a means to be in service of any *a priori* entity or idea of entityhood. By this I mean, while it may be considered moral, as Levinas argues, to serve another as a means to serving God or a faith in divinity, the responsibility of being towards another is one, *"... that is justified by no prior commitment …*" (102). Even though such an act of faith may be put to the service of another, such an act approaches a relationship with or towards alterity that is defined by an epistemology or ontology that is otherwise than the Other – it is still located in and returns to a solitarily defined being. As an "I" who in this case defines oneself through their faith in a divinity, a theology, a philosophy, an ideology, etc., one acts upon rather than towards another as a means to the vindication of one's identity or identification in such a faith. We see such a crisis explored in the first chapter of the second section, in a reading of Tagore's *Chaturanga*. Sachis seeks to "save" Nanibala, a destitute and abused widow from her destitution and abuse. He offers to marry her to protect her, not because he loved her. He acts out of his sense of a moral good, which in turn is based in his faith in a Liberal Humanism. Feeling entrapped in Sachis' sense of a moral goodness, Nanibala commits suicide as a means to escape having to justify the feelings she harbored for the man who had abducted and raped her. The moment becomes pivotal to Sachis' narrative in the rest of the novella, as it causes him to turn away from the values of the Liberal Humanism that were instilled in him through a colonially mediated European education in 19th century British India. He is overwhelmed by his incapacity to save the life of another and his

perception of such an incapacity as a failure causes him to abandon the very beliefs by which he defines himself.

The sense of failure that Sachis never articulates, the same sense of failure that shapes his narrative in *Chaturanga* is not a failure of the human capacity to act or be towards another, rather it is a failure of the categories through which he seeks to author his actions. Tagore subtly points to the failure of definitions in the extreme. Sachis' sense of failure in being able to love, should we think of love as a form of being towards another, is bookended by a warped sense of both Western Enlightenment categories of humanism and an idea of human salvation through mysticism. When Sachis embraces what he perceives as the polar opposite of western rationality, he loses his grasp over the human world he inhabits. As Sribilas recounts, when the two were reunited after a long separation, Sachis did not clasp his friend to his breast, but an idea of the universe (Tagore 34). In either sense, he is incapable of seeing the person, the person is only made accessible to him through categories, through universals of the human or the divine. The point I am trying to make through revisiting the analysis of Sachis' life in Tagore's novella, is merely this, that the infinitude of human experience and thereby the human condition is irreducible to the totalities of category. However, more importantly, is it possible to encounter and engage alterity otherwise than categoricals? How does one engage the Other who is, as Levinas would say, absolutely other? Those whose experiences and very existence defy all categories through which one apprehends and comprehends the world and beings in it? I think of one of the protagonists from Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*; Anjum who is named Aftab at birth.

The passage cited at the start of this conclusion, inaugurates not only Roy's novel but also introduces the major thematic that runs through its complex intersecting narratives. The first component of such a thematic is the very problem of categories, especially identitarian categories

and their circumscription of experience. Therefore, do the categories we inhabit or even cohabit exhaust the infinity of our existences? We first encounter such questions in Anjum's narrative. As I observe in the conclusion of my dissertation, there seems to be disjunction between Anjum's existential and experiential realities. To reiterate, Anjum is born intersex, assigned male at birth, and raised as a boy named Aftab. Aftab's "girl-part" was surgically corrected shortly after birth, and all was assumed to be well until the onset of puberty; when Aftab's "innate femininity" could no longer be suppressed – neither psychologically nor physiologically. Aftab eventually runs away from home to join a commune of *Hijras,* a historical third-gender community across South Asian cultures. Aftab assimilates into the community of *Hijras*, undergoes the ritual castration and assumes the name Anjum. The commune is housed in a dilapidated old mansion called *Khwabgah* in a decaying neighborhood in Old Delhi: a name that can be translated in one of two ways. Literally it translates to the abode of dreams – a place where dreams find home, alternatively it could also mean a sleeping chamber or a place of slumber. Both senses seem to equally define the lives of the old mansion's inhabitants. Within its confines the inhabitants of *Khwabgah*, who have been shunned by their families and cast out by society, find a home for both themselves and an expression of their selves. They could dress as they pleased: adorn themselves in garish clothes, jewellery and make up. Some of the inhabitants who could only dream of living as women, were able to shed the societal and cultural entrapments of their male bodies and live as, what in contemporary identitarian theorizations one might call, "their most authentic selves." However, it is in such a living of "authenticity", that the other sense of the word starts to trace its meaning around those living within the confines of *Khwabgah*. In a conversation with one of the senior *Hijras,* Anjum; who was still desperately desiring to no longer be Aftab at the time, learns of the

deep disillusionment with the outside world that a place such as *Khwabgah* often concealed and that its capacities for wish-fulfillment were limited. Nimmo says to Aftab:

"'D'you know why God made Hijras?' she asked Aftab one afternoon while she flipped through a dog-eared 1967 issue of *Vogue*, lingering over the blonde ladies with bare legs who so enthralled her.

'No, why?'

It was an experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness. So he made us" (Roy 26-27).

"This was the first Aftab learnt of the divide between the world of the *Hijras* and that of the "normal people" – essentially realities outside of *Khwabgah*. The people who lived in the world were concerned with things the *Hijras* had no use for, Nimmo said:

Prise-rise, children's school admissions, husbands' beatings, wives' cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war—*outside* things that settle down eventually. But for us the price-rise and school-admissions and beating-husbands and cheating-wives are all *inside* us. It will never settle down. It *can't*" (27).

While Aftab was deeply pained by the older *Hijra's* cynicism, as Anjum she later realizes the same, when she tries to bring something from the "*outside*" into the confines of *Khwabgah* – she tries to experience motherhood by adopting an abandoned girlchild. She would then recall Nimmo Gorakhpuri's wisdom about how the *Hijra* was, in truth a scavenger of happiness – they lived off the leftovers from joys that could never be theirs (28). As Anjum later realizes that there are certain dreams that even *Khwabgah* could not nurture – for Nimmo it was the dream of wifehood, of being the mistress of her own household. For Anjum, she herself would go on realize that a life in *Khwabgah*, was not only not conducive to her desire for motherhood, but would never accommodate the full breadth of her experience – gendered or otherwise. As Anjum moves out of *Khwabgah*, the narrative also starts to expand its scope to the "outside world." The transition into the other narrative threads in the novel begins, yet again with an interrogation of categories. Anjum who had all but decided to move out *Khwabgah* and the *Hijra* commune and community for the sake of her daughter Zainab, decides to make a pilgrimage in Zainab's name to the shrine of the

Sufi saint Hazrat Gharib Nawaz in Ahmadabad, Gujarat. This was around the time of the infamous Gujarat Riots of 2002. On the morning of February 27, 2002, fifty-nine Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya by the Sabarmati Express were killed when fire erupted in the train close to the Godhra railway station in Gujarat. The exact circumstances leading up to and on from the fire in the train at Godhra and the three day-long series of pogromatic riots across the state targeting Muslims, is still a subject for hotly contested claims and counter claims. In Roy's novel, Anjum's visit to Ahmedabad coincides with the onset of the riots that started in Godhra and spread across Gujarat. Caught in crossfire, Anjum manages to survive and escape, because both the rioting Hindus and Muslims agreed on the superstitious belief that it was inauspicious to kill a *Hijra*, so the only maimed instead.

The incident only exacerbates Anjum's discomfort with the identitarian category she inhabits. She moves out of *Khwabgah* but not quite into the "*outside*" world, in somewhat surrealist twist she takes up residence and begins living in an old abandoned graveyard. It is through her location, yet again, in an arguably liminal space that the "*outside*" world starts to open up to Anjum, the narrative and the reader. We gradually move away from a close focus on Anjum's life to the city of Delhi itself and through the city to the nation. We increasingly start to encounter mentions of the ongoing crisis in Kashmir. We encounter the regular congregation of protestors at Jantar Mantar, each individual or group demonstrating and registering their protest and dissent against every issue imaginable – ranging from class or caste apartheid to gender inequality, state and/or police brutality against civilians and so on. As stated, Anjum's movement out of her cloistered existence in *Khwabgah* opens the novel's narrative up to a contemplation of events in the nation's history. One might even go as far as arguing, as I have indicated in the conclusion of my dissertation, that the discomfort around the identitarian categories Anjum inhabits somehow

metonymically suggest the discomforts of inhabiting categories of nationhood and citizenry. Such an extrapolation might seem a bit of a reach, but in the light of the recent crises in the status of India's citizenry surrounding the implementations of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the proposed updating of a National Register of Citizens (NRC). Amidst the larger concerns regarding the threats to India's secular fabric, as I have argued across the first part of my dissertation, there was little coverage of the challenges such an updating of the NRC posed to India's third-gender and transgender populations. Populations represented through Anjum in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. *Hijras* were not granted voting rights in India until 1994; forty-seven years after India gained independence from British colonial rule and forty-four years after the nation was constituted as a "Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic Republic." It was not until 2014 that the Supreme Court of India, in *National Legal Services Authority vs. Union of India* ruled affirming fundamental and constitutional rights to transgender and third-gender individuals residing in the nation. The ruling also allowed such individuals the right to self-identify their gender on all forms of government identifications and legal documentation. As we saw in the case of the inhabitants of *Khwabgah*, many such communities of transgender and third-gender peoples live in isolation and segregation. There is also the added struggle of illiteracy and the lack of information that often stems from systemic inequalities and prejudice. Hence, a large section of third-gender and transgender communities in India find themselves without the necessary documentation to "prove" their citizenship within the proposed updating of the NRC. Roy's narrative deftly moves back and forth between Anjum's story and a larger context of the ongoing national crisis in Kashmir. The symbolism that the two narrative threads resonate in is perhaps the complex question around the operationalities of categories. Anjum is the limit case for socio-

cultural categories of gender, while Kashmir emerges as the historio-political limit case for Indian nationhood.

This brings me to the second aspect of the aforementioned thematic surrounding the nature of categories, which is: can an individual or a collective have or be assigned value outside of such forms of categorical reasoning? Do categories of identity and identification, by the very fact of their existential operationalities function as systems by which value is assigned to individual and collective lives? Moreover, do such systems also point towards the devaluation of certain lives – systemically or otherwise? It is in the articulation of such concerns that the readings of literary and philosophical texts presented in the second part of of this work echo contemporary concerns within moral philosophy and moral psychology. These are, I attempt to argue, questions regarding the status of the Other that get posed alongside any act of inhabiting the world as Self. Does the inhabiting of a world, especially for those of us who can do so through categories of identity and identification, imply a debt to others who are designated as existing outside of such categories? Should one push the inquiries presented by contemporary thinkers such as Judith Butler, for example, to contemplate an existence of relative security as a debt owed to the relatively vulnerable, or should one's imagination allow for such a contemplation – the absolutely vulnerable?

However, as I have also argued, that while such questions regarding the status of the Other – even the absolutely Other, do increasingly inform our practices in the humanities academy today, there continues to remain a sense or discomfort attached to engaging them. As I posit through my readings of Edward Said's *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, one might think of practices of humanistic scholarship as based in a praxis for being in the world through forms of participatory citizenship. And while such a practice is often lauded for its transformative potential through the

exercise democratic criticism, however, such configurations regarding the purpose and function of humanism in a context of "being in the world," emerging as the more often do from positions of relative security, also fail to recognize the cost of such practices beyond the academy in real terms. It also forces us to contemplate the vast and varied liminalities and precarities that are shared across our separate yet interconnected existences across the world – our shared predicaments of inhabitation and cohabitation.

The *limen* forces us to contemplate the limits of the seemingly shared categories through which we apprehend, comprehend and inhabit the worlds around us. It is through contemplating the *limen* that an ethics of engagement might emerge, for it is precisely liminality that calls forth a capacity for imagination. Encounters with liminality, as I earlier suggested in citing the example of the *Mu'tazila*, force a withdrawal from the demands of knowledge or judgement, or an epistemologically determined authorship of action. Such encounters demand of the thinking subject to reflect on the very "task of thinking." Therefore, in a final analysis, the question that finds iteration and reiteration across this work, takes cue from Levinas' ideas in works such as *Humanism of the Other*. A consideration that he admits might be, "out of date," but one that is nonetheless still pertinent: whether one is, "not yet or no longer needs to be frightened by the word *humanism*" (Levinas, *Humanism* 3). The consideration he speaks of, one might surmise is one of relationality, a relationship with Being and towards the Other, and the role a practice of the humanities plays in the imagining of such relationalities. The sense of failure Sachis experiences in *Chaturanga* is a failure of the Self defined in totality that fails to apprehend an encounter with the infinity of the Other. The question the *face* poses will continue to demand the extricating of oneself from the totalities of identity and identification. The Other is wholly Other but, as Levinas and Ricoeur have also argued, is structurally no different from the Self – in as much as the Other

too is a being with attributes and perhaps even with a totality of its own. Does such a structural similarity, and a realization of the same, however, translate into an ethics of being towards another? In one sense, the recognition would necessitate imagination, however, such an imagination also carries with it the ethical demand that one not does see one's imagination of the Other as standing in for the Other experientiality. In other words, the Other's alterity does not offer us an epistemology. However, in the absence of such epistemologies, a phenomenology of the Being's experience of its Other would, as Levinas argues in his critique of Heidegger, have to be an interminable movement towards exteriority. The *face* holds me responsible for endeavouring towards such a movement. The question facing the humanist today is that of such a capacity for the responsibility of being towards. This is the question that this work, were I to sum up its intent and purport, seeks to contemplate and meditate upon.

Such questions take on a deeper significance, as I have argued in the light of the more contemporary resuscitations of isolationist, insular and even fundamentalist nationalisms on national, international and global levels. As Arjun Appadurai argued over a decade ago in *The Fear of Small Numbers*, the "era of high globalization" which he ascribes to the decade of the 1990s, was arguably causative to a majoritarian global investment in neoliberal politics. One could argue for a contextualization of the contemporary rise in nationalist isolationism within such processes of globalization. Such a contextualization, perhaps, finds a particular significance in both present contemplations of the human condition and humanist scholarship through questions pertaining to the status of the Other. My work proceeds from hereon to contemplating what Emmanuel Levinas would later go on to describe as a *Humanism of the Other*. Such a humanism, as Richard Cohen rightly emphasizes is one founded on the "irreducible dignity" of all human life. It is in such an irreducible dignity that Levinas holds both the concepts of alterity and the Other.

Difference is by no means an instrument through which the Other may be robbed of their fundamental dignity as a being. Such an emphasis on the inviolable dignity of the Other, in Levinas' work, I have argued, does present a more optimistic view of possible engagements with otherness, especially when contrasted with approaches that treat the Other as an absence that traces presence. I am of course speaking of Derrida, but more specifically Derridean approaches to a question of alterity. However, such seemingly contrasting views of alterity and the Other, in my understanding stem from similar concerns regarding the problems of relationality both within and beyond the forging of collectivities. What is the basis of a relationship with the Other? If alterity is truly radical, as Levinas would argue, is relationality or collectivity even possible? How do such contemplations inform and impact the being who desires collectivity or community with other beings? It is perhaps herein, as Levinas suggest, one might contemplate the nature of desire itself and how such a desire for another, forms the basis for an ethical engagement with alterity. And for Levinas, desire for the Other can only arise in a Self that is secure and complete within its own interiority. Desire for the Other cannot for him therefore be a desire for self-completion or fulfilment. Desire is about being towards the desired object or as Levinas simply calls it the Desired. Such a being towards is grounded in a recognition of, as already stated, the inviolable dignity of not only being but more importantly being's Other – the otherwise than being. However, in the interests of brevity and constraints of time, I proceed directly to the set of questions my work culminates in, which concisely framed is this, could one think of the Other in similar terms should such an Other be consciously and violently absented from Being? What relationality can one claim towards another whose dignity has been violated most absolutely, and in whose violation one is implicated? It is such an Other that I refer to as a "signing" Other, for in being deracinated, what such an Other has been denied is a capacity for signification, or as Paul Ricoeur would state a

capacity for authorship. It is towards the exploration of such questions that I turn to readings of Toni Morrison's works. Such a rendered incapacity for signification, I argue particularly in the immediately preceeding last chapter also forms the grounds for our incapacities in engaging and reading such a deracinated Other.

It is in such a sense that I relate, in these concluding paragraphs, the works of Morrison and Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. While such conclusions might seem pessimistic, I see such realizations as potentially generative. Literature, I believe, has this power. For example, when I read the concluding passages of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* or the epilogue to *Beloved*, I see the possibilities of a new beginning. Horrifying as it might be, to behold the face of the Other, whose deracination implicates me, doing so also presents us with a choice. Such a choice may not be one of acting to save the life of another, as we have seen in my discussions of the novels by Morrison or in the novella by Tagore. It becomes, to borrow again from Ricoeur, a meditation on one's capacity – a recognition that one's capable subjecthood is active in the world even if one is not always aware of its operationality. It is as Butler has repeatedly argued, that one's own security always comes at a cost, and usually such a cost is borne not by oneself, but by another who's precarity is the currency for one's own security. I am not suggesting that a recognition of such a beholdenment alone alleviates the violation or violence of deracination. Recognizing indebtedness, logically speaking, does not a debt fulfill. More importantly, recognizing alterity in such extremities, perhaps emphasizes for oneself, that one cannot begin to fathom what to offer such an Other in way of either comfort or reparation. As George Steiner reminds us, that there is perhaps nothing more horrifying in the aftermath of the *Shoah* as the figure of the *Muselmäner*. How does one act to save the life of another whose life has been rendered beyond the dichotomies of perishing and surviving? To borrow Agamben's term, how does one begin to endeavor towards saving a

"bare life?" However, the figure of the *Muselmäner*, as Steiner emphasizes, also points to the absolute horror of the death camps. To those who deny that the Nazi machineries of mass extermination he presents the *Muselmäner*. One could not hear the sound of their breathing at night reported some survivors of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Steiner reminds us. One wonders whether even they knew the difference between sleeping and waking. What would it take to completely thwart the most fundamental living instinct for survival? Imagining exactly this to its fullest extent – to its most extreme point, because there is no way to know such an experience, perhaps would preempt the likelihood of the perpetuation of such "spectacular" violence.

My hope in my present work is that through such recognitions might arise a renewed understanding of the human capacity of being towards another. Such an understanding is perhaps preeminently pertinent to our present moment. I think of the circumstances, for example, that have given my work its present form and context. We are in the midst of a global pandemic, and several social thinkers and philosophers have already commented on how such a moment prompts the recognition of our shared vulnerabilities as human beings and is also an equally generative moment in the contemplation of moral epistemologies. I think back to the frenzy that erupted with the outbreak of COVID-19 and the ensuing fear of life as we know it coming to a grinding halt. I recall the frantic mobs at supermarkets buying every last case of toilet paper and every last bottle of household disinfectant – stock piling resources more than they could ever use or need. However, when we have scrambled in so many different ways to secure ourselves, completely disregarding the cost to others – when we have realized that that last bottle of hand sanitizer we grabbed off the shelf does not in any realistic terms make us immune to the virus, we then have a moment to may be reflect on the fundamental precarity we all share as complexly vulnerable organisms. I am reminded of a video that appeared on my YouTube feed on the morning of March 14th. As dusk

fell, over a neighborhood in Siena, Italy – in one of the nations worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, people broke into song through their open windows. The song, I later read in a news article, was a popular folk song recognizable to all living in that community. One could read several things into such a moment, but what is perhaps most poignant and relevant in such a an act of people reaching out to one another, is the very fact that we as a people have the capacity to reach out to one another and to be in the world by being towards one another.

Thank You.

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