

**FRAGMENTATION AND MUTABILITY IN M.G.  
VASSANJI'S *THE BOOK OF SECRETS***

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## Summary

My thesis will look at how *The Book of Secrets* shows that there is nothing neutral in the manner through which meaning is assembled, particularly as regards world history, which has installed within the present a knowledge of the world's historical past as emanating from Europe. By focussing on the silences in history, the text insists on the irreducibility of experience, which cannot be contained within an objective knowledge of the world as advanced by Enlightenment notions of a universal scientific empiricism. Vassanji's novel highlights how a universal perspective is only made possible through the excision of other ways of knowing the world, and it accomplishes this through themes of fragmentation and flux. By signalling the existence of what lies beyond the paradigm of universal humanism, of meaning which does not need to be foreclosed, the novel compels a ceaseless questioning of the present, allowing for other ways of being.

## Fragmentation and Mutability in M.G.Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*

### 1. Introduction

*The Book of Secrets* is a novel centred around the discovery of a stolen diary. Containing the impressions one Alfred Corbin, the journal, which traces his arrival and early years in Africa, is framed within the larger context of the research of Pius Fernandes, a retired history teacher. In his interview with Fisher, Vassanji states, “When I write about the past, the present always matters—who’s telling the story, from what perspective, how much can you really know about the past, the ambiguity and contradictions and the subjectivity of history and memory . . . it’s not someone standing outside it, an omniscient narrator”. Commencing with an extract from Pius’s own diary, the novel focuses on multiple narrative strands to demonstrate the simultaneous potential and limitations of stories; the enduring significance, but also the contradictory fragility, of memory; the uses and abuses of history in the complex interplay between individuals, communities, and nation. In this thesis, I wish to explore how the novel’s themes of fragmentation and flux, and Vassanji’s treatment of narrative, effect the shattering and subsequent relativisation of the concept of a ‘universal’ history.

In seeking to understand the ways in which the modern present has been articulated within the context of the hegemonising global imperative that is Occidental modernity, Young argues for the relevance of colonial discourse analysis, which, far from being “a specialized activity only for minorities or for historians of imperialism and colonialism . . . itself forms the point of questioning of Western knowledge’s categories and assumptions” (*White Mythologies* 43); for “humanism itself, often validated amongst the highest values of European civilization, was deeply complicit with the violent

negativity of colonialism, and played a crucial part in its ideology” (*ibid* 160). The novel describes how Corbin can feel his “soul . . . stirring” as he pictures himself “finally entering the interior of Africa . . . the huge and dark continent that had defied the rest of the world for millennia, now opening up to European civilization” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 23). Shortly after disembarking, Corbin finds his opposite in the character of Frank Maynard, “a captain in the King’s African Rifles” who, renowned for his “ferocity and ruthlessness” (*ibid* 18), embodies “[t]he unapologetically violent enforcement of imperialism” (Toron 3). The novel introduces a tension between the rhetoric and the reality of colonial rule through the character of Maynard, whose brutality and savagery reveal the contradictions inherent in the colonial enterprise. In addressing himself to Corbin, Maynard makes a number of contradictory and confused statements that combine ideas of the essential nature of Africa, taking the land as metonym for its people, even as he parrots romanticized Enlightenment notions of the noble savage, an idea that tunes into the concept of the universal man, suggested when he tells Corbin, “I respect the African—as a redoubtable enemy or as a friend” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 20). Maynard then ends off by reinstating the binary hierarchy which validates colonial rule when he tells Corbin that “the white man, . . . authority, . . . order—they are the same thing here” (*ibid* 21). That Corbin “disapprove[s] of his actions, not of the man” (*ibid* 22) suggests that Corbin and Maynard merely represent the two faces of the coin that is colonialism. In the “*Governor’s Memoranda for PCs and DCs . . . [on] Native Policy*” (*ibid* 31), the text shows how, by imagining an Africa mired in the dark timelessness of primitivity, Britain finds in its representation of its racial ‘other’ a reflection of itself as the self-proclaimed bearer of light. Preceded by the guiding lamp of Enlightenment

rationality, which brings with it “a high stage of civilisation” and is attended by the values of “manliness, self-respect, and honest dealing”, the “higher ideals of morality and justice”, the British Empire, “with its experience of ruling other lands and with its humane system”, becomes justified as “the best nurturing ground for an emerging nation, for backward Africans and Orientals to enter the society of civilized peoples” (*ibid*).

Informed by a seemingly transcendental reason and grounded in the universalising logic of empirical observation, narratives of Western imperial history often seek to justify colonialism by framing it as a process that allowed for the unilateral transmission of modernity, civilisation and culture to the ‘undeveloped’ societies of the colonised.

However, as Livingstone points out, it was “[d]uring the middle years of the nineteenth century, with the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, [that] attention shifted to the possibility of appropriating the vast resources of the continent itself: this second phase brought the moment of colonialism proper, culminating in the ‘scramble for Africa’ of the 1880s” (259). Not only was modernity with its Enlightenment values of humanism and rationalism employed as justification for colonialism, via the exaltation of a hierarchical trajectory of development placing European culture at the pinnacle of civilisation and “a ‘scientific racism’ that justified domination in the name of a civilizational superiority” (Livingstone 259), it was Empire’s “capitalist search for higher profits from colonial conquest” (Mudimbe 2), its economic exploitation of the colonies, and the subsequent wealth of the metropole that enabled Europe’s transition into modernity.

Corbin retrospectively summarises the endeavours of Empire as “a chapter of world history . . . therewith . . . closed. We went with the best of intentions” (Vassanji,

*The Book of Secrets* 329). Yet, as suggested by the novel, colonialism is not quite ‘post’, nor is Empire dead, for the changes wrought by the project of Western imperialism continue to reverberate through time and manifest themselves within the present. Vassanji makes this point clear within the novel through the recurrence of dreams of “imperial nostalgia, as a way of restaging its lost identity” (Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness* 21); these dreams are evinced by Corbin’s consultation “with the BBC on a drama titled ‘The Barons of Uasin Gishu,’ based on the lives of the white aristocratic settlers of Kenya. It . . . brings (somewhat wistfully) Old England and the Empire to the American republic” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 330), pointing strongly to the ways in which colonialism under Europe has merely given way to cultural, political, and economic neo-imperialism under America. Therefore, the question of “[w]hat is history, sir?” (*ibid* 4) that Feroz poses to Fernandes is one asked by the novel in earnest, bringing to our attention the necessity for an inquiry into what Corbin disingenuously refers to as a closed chapter of ‘world history’. For history—or, more accurately, historicism as a practice—is not a means of gaining direct access to the past so much as it is “the testimony of what is: as knowledge, discourse, debate, representation, interpretation” (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 35). Put differently, the writing of history is a project deeply invested in the establishment of the present, which constitutes itself in terms of what it knows—or acknowledges—of what came before. Keeping this in view, Said’s recognition of the Occident’s “homogenising and incorporating world historical scheme that assimilated non-synchronous developments, histories, cultures, and peoples to it” (210) generates an awareness of how world history, being a euphemism for Western history, has installed within the present a knowledge of the world’s historical past as



emanating from Europe: in other words, a sense of history (and thus a sense of the reality we inhabit) that privileges the arc of the development of Western civilisation, even as it conceals its partiality beneath the universalising language of Enlightenment rationalism, wherein “historical truth lies not in the languages that provide us with our sense of inhabiting and making sense of the world but elsewhere, in the ‘facts’ and ‘truth’ revealed by reason” (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 12).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Corbin’s words reveal his disavowal of a far more complex and traumatic past, of “numerous scars on the land” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 190) that cannot be effaced simply by an assertion of good intentions, a fact reinforced by the novel’s depiction of how present sites continue to be haunted by a past that cannot be laid to rest. Vassanji repeatedly draws the reader’s attention to the presence or presentness of a ghostly past that continues to inhabit or creep into the spaces of the here and now, demonstrated by how the diary, containing a hitherto undiscovered history, is unearthed from the storeroom of Fernandes’s former student, Feroz, in turn described as “that famous backroom of Pipa’s day, thought then to harbour in its darkness all kinds of mysteries and evidence of shady dealing which the police could never lay their hands on. Now it was a bright fluorescent-lighted room” (*ibid* 4).<sup>2</sup>

McClintock writes, “imperialism is not something that happened elsewhere—a disagreeable fact of history external to Western identity. Rather, imperialism and the

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<sup>1</sup> Southgate compellingly points out that “[e]xisting histories . . . have been ‘partial’ in both senses of that word: first, they have presented only one small part of an infinitely complex whole; and second, that part itself has been narrowly interpreted, with its focus consciously or unconsciously determined by the writer’s own position and prejudices” (107).

<sup>2</sup> This is also allusively referenced later in the novel by how the graves “[i]n the middle of a mango grove . . . have all been reused, very recently. Ancient carved gravestones, new graves, five, ten years old” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 178).

invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity” (5), and neocolonial and neoimperial inequalities continue to persist between developed nations and the ‘third-world’. The assumption of what Walter Benjamin terms the “homogeneous, empty time” (261) of modernity is in fact riddled with discontinuous modernities, rendering the ostensible universality of historicism’s claims of progress and development deeply suspect. Rather, “by bringing non-Western territory into the capitalist world”, colonialism established a global order centred around Europe, which developed “at the expense of other parts, either by trade or by the transfer of surpluses” (Mudimbe 3). Beyond the economic inequalities engendered by a system of exploitation that not only diverted material resources, but also destroyed traditional knowledges related to agriculture and crafts, Mudimbe goes on to outline the epistemic toll taken by the colonial enterprise, which brought about the disintegration of African social, cultural and religious arrangements through the imposition of its institutions and its ideologies (4). Subsequently, to uncover the influence of historical narratives over our lives is to expose “the link between the structures of knowledge and the forms of oppression of the last two hundred years: a phenomenon that has become known as Eurocentricism” (Young, *White Mythologies* 33), which is “premised on a universal identity that, nevertheless, was predicated on systematic modes of exclusion” (Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness* 4). Post-colonial theory, then, performs the necessary task of turning a self-reflexive eye towards the problems and contradictions inherent within the global narrative of modernity, as well as in the narratives comprising the categories of identity and knowledge that we all inhabit, for, as Gikandi makes clear, “the epistemic gestures

through which Europe came to be constituted as a universal force must, given its ‘real-life’ consequences, be read as political” (6).

As a text that self-consciously foregrounds and investigates the possibilities of its own artificiality, *The Book of Secrets* draws attention to the fact that there is nothing natural or neutral in the manner through which meaning is assembled; as White reminds us, "by a specific arrangement of the events reported in the documents, and without offense to the truth value of the facts selected, a given sequence of events can be emplotted in a number of different ways" ("Interpretation in History" 294). Significantly, it is a diary that Vassanji chooses for his central metaphor: a book that contains secrets of a personal nature, but also a book of English words, that “insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline” (Bhabha 102), which conceals a secret—namely, the myth of “conquest and its civilizational authority . . . the imperial mythology promoted by the colonial textbook” (Gikandi 26). In the novel, Vassanji turns our focus towards Corbin’s diary, a “1913 edition . . . of the ‘Explorer’ variety, which could be used for the following year, presumably by those confined to those regions of the globe with limited access to amenities. . . . The endpapers were covered with advertisements of the day . . . There followed . . . postal rates to South Africa; cable rates, and 1913 custom tariffs to South Africa” (6). In so doing, he supplies us with details that underscore the historicity of the object, alerting us to the ways in which the diary is ringed about and literally inscribed upon by the logistics of colonial enterprise; the diary, in other words, is a cultural artefact that points to the historicity of the West itself.<sup>3</sup> By pinpointing the

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<sup>3</sup> Not even a brand new journal is a *tabula rasa* that arrives unmarked by the conditions of its production. By locating the conditions of the diary’s production within the operations of Empire, Vassanji suggests that just like the diary, so too are we cultural products who have been inscribed upon; the historian who claims to serve merely as a

emergence of “Enlightenment and European humanism” (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 25) from within a specific time and space, Vassanji lays bare the cultural coordinates and origins of the ostensibly universal values that are valorised by and which simultaneously undergird colonialism—and which, it must be noted here, are championed also by Fernandes, the self-identified historian and “humanist” narrator of the novel, who is as much a product of his situation as the objects of his study (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 238).<sup>4</sup> Through its emphasis on “the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline” (White, “The Burden of History” 113), the novel frames the writing of history as a *cultural* practice through which meaning is created and transmitted, thus bringing the reader into an “ethnography in which the ‘man’ of knowledge, the scientist, the subject, becomes the object of a discourse, of a history, of a world, of an ontological space that is interrogated and interrogating” (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 25).

Vassanji seeks to address the troubled authority of imperial narrative by highlighting the fictionality of British colonial identity itself, which constructs itself through “a structure of binary oppositions” (Ashcroft, *On Post-Colonial Futures* 112). The book of secrets, which captures and subsequently controls the spirits contained within its pages, emblematises how, “through the writing of the colonial landscape and its subjects, the provincial concerns of several European countries assumed a universal normativity” (Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness* 6). The clear divide between inside and outside becomes undermined, however, when the text goes on to suggest the

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mouthpiece for history becomes revealed a product of his or her time who inevitably reproduces or reflects, to some extent, the sentiments of the age.

<sup>4</sup> The text tells us that, as ‘ideal’ colonial subjects, Fernandes and his colleagues represent, respectively, the Enlightenment virtues of observation, logic and the universal progress and betterment of mankind. “Desouza was the scientist, Kuldip the mathematician, and I the humanist” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 238).

impossibility of locating a position beyond the temporal and spatial coordinates from which the ‘universal’ man emerges. This is evinced by the novel’s description of how the “mzungu first and foremost captured himself in his bottle-book; and long after it left his side—taking part of him with it—it continued to capture other souls and their secrets, and to dictate its will upon them” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 1-2). Not only does the bottle-book, this signifier of colonial authority, work its will upon the “captured spirits” (*ibid* 1) within its discourse, it also subjects its author to the same, suggesting the fundamental role that “history, language and culture [play] in the construction of subjectivity and identity” (S. Hall, “New Ethnicities” 201). In his analysis of the “*denial of coevalness*”, Fabian describes the manner in which adjectives such as “*mythical, ritual, or even tribal*” are employed to “connote temporal distancing as a way of creating the objects or referents of anthropological discourse. To use an extreme formulation: temporal distance *is* objectivity” (30-31). Put simply, the historical progress of British civilisation is implicitly measured against the timeless primitivity of its racial ‘others’, whose pasts are devalued by being framed as ‘myth’, and which are assumed to exist in a time before Time. However, the novel’s reference to “a Latin inscription [in the diary]: ‘at nos hinc ...’ the rest was stained and illegible” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 6) underscores the fragile and mythical core of British imperial identity, which drew upon the wealth of Roman literature (itself beholden to Greek culture), not only to enrich its own, but also to construct a narrative—a trajectory—bridging the glory of the Roman Empire with that of Britain’s own historical foundations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Drawn from Virgil’s *Eclogues*, the full quote, “*At nos hinc alii sitientis ibimus Afros*”, translated, reads, “Yet some of us will have to leave this spot for Afric’s arid clime” (Millington 7).

By trapping the *mzungu* within the book he writes, the text forces an acknowledgement of how intrinsic definitions of imperial Britain “as a pastoral ideal or racialized body” (Gikandi 24) must give way to the awareness of the manner in which “Europe constitutes itself as a subject gazing at the other” (*ibid* 20). The necessarily descriptive fictionality (through which historicism establishes its arguments and constructs a vision of a totalised past) of any historical account is demonstrated when, upon approaching the coast of Africa, Corbin reflects upon “[h]ow fitting . . . this sight of Africa, that it should greet you so gently . . . It was in order to be impressed, to confirm his school boy expectations fed on tales of famous adventurers and explorers, that he had strained his eyes seaward” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 11). Livingstone explains that:

[F]or one significant strand of imperial discourse, Africa represents the great unknown, a terrain to be systematically secured for reliable knowledge; its very existence poses a challenge to western conceptions of rationality, even a provocative limit to the power of Enlightenment . . . In another variant, Africa appears as the quintessential land of adventure, a place for European manhood to display its prowess. (258)

Tellingly, upon encountering “this menace-filled darkness” wherein “all one’s scientific objectivism seemed vulnerable” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 52), Corbin is confronted with epistolary failure, causing him to reflect on how far away the light of Europe seems. Vassanji rewords and reworks the ‘menace’ of the African night into something far more insidious, which, instead of preserving the difference between the European self and its racial others, overwhelms the carefully delineated boundaries constructed by sight and a language of “scientific objectivism” which disowns its representational nature, thus

revealing how the vocabulary of rational detachment, far from being neutral, objective or disinterested, is itself a form of discourse involving “the creation, subjection and final appropriation of Europe’s ‘others’” (Young, *White Mythologies* 33).

In his article, “Am I a Canadian Writer?”, Vassanji laments the homogeneity and latent racism of nation and national identity in his observation of how “multiculturalism” serves merely as “a holding area for immigrants, a quarantine to hold the virus . . . while succeeding generations have time to emerge, fully . . . assimilated . . . Who is multicultural except the immigrants . . . those whose language is not English, whose culture is not western and Christian”. Vassanji’s own identity—ethnically Indian, born in Africa, identifying as an African, yet living in Canada—challenges and problematizes a straightforward association of culture with race with nationality through the tracings and traces of diasporic movement across oceans, over continents, through histories. Thus, glossing Gilroy, Mondal points out that “the act of physical movement . . . traverses—and thereby destabilises—those discursive formations that seek to ‘ground’ our identity. Identity thus emerges through the interplay between ‘roots’ and ‘routes’” (125). And if Rushdie asserts that:

Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. We can quite legitimately claim as our ancestors the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews; the past to which we belong is an English past, the history of immigrant Britain (20)

Vassanji intriguingly and subversively takes Rushdie’s claim to a multiple inheritance one step further by posing the possibility of how “the sense of national self [is] also going

to change. . . . Canada's past lies not only in the native stories of the land itself, but also in Europe, and now in Africa and Asia", suggesting that not only do the histories of nations belong to diaspora, diasporic histories, with their complex and heterogeneous strands, also belong to the nation ("Am I a Canadian Writer?").

My essay consists of three chapters. In the first section, I lay the foundations of my argument by considering the ways in which Vassanji deploys the tropes of fragmentation and movement to pick apart the homogeneous, empty time of modernity, allowing other times and other places to insinuate themselves into his text. The present is split, rendered porous, becoming a site of flux and instability as it is invaded by other times and other places, compelling us to question and to allow for the provisionality of knowledge. The novel performs a re-configuration of the universal body of knowledge by privileging sound over writing, multiple refractions over mimetic reflection, movement over closure, and hyphenated identities and multivalent allegiances over the straightforward association of race with culture, or identity with nationality. Chambers tells us that excess obliges a questioning, raising the "ethical impossibility of ultimate closure, control, totality and the accompanying agenda of rendering all – scientifically, technically, politically, culturally – transparent. What exceeds the ubiquitous desire for closure, conclusion and confirmation of the self, is what exceeds and challenges our understanding." (*Culture After Humanism* 42). Manifesting within the novel as polyphony and mutability, this results in a here-and-now of hybrid temporalities wherein the modernity of the nation intersects with the 'other' narratives and temporalities of religion, memory and hybrid affiliations. The mutability of the other is such that it cannot be fixed in place by the Occidental gaze; it is an unruly presence which cannot be



explained or rationally known; it does not conform to official narratives. Its formlessness is an unruly presence that cannot be explained rationally, which does not conform to official narratives and constantly slips beyond one's grasp; for, as Cooppan suggests, it is "movement that allows the reimagining of place and identity" (270).

In my second chapter, I will look at the ways in which language, narrative, and representation contain but also constitute the identities of the colonised within the text. Narratives necessarily shape the ways in which we relate to the world, other people, as well as ourselves; at the same time, narratives seek to stabilise knowledge, to fix it in place, through the association of historicism with 'reason' that constructs reality through a transparent language that claims to neutrally present the world 'as it is'. Vassanji demonstrates to the reader, however, that the attempt by narrative to fix and thus control the objects of its representations is never entirely successful due to the internal contradictions and schisms that arise within its discourse. Put simply, efforts to contain the complex and multi-layered reality of identity and being only point towards the limitations and constructedness of any representation. It is only through an acknowledgment of the ways in which narratives of historicism, racism, nation and community work to define but also constrict individuals that we can begin to come to terms with the injustices and tragedies engendered through the fatal logic of boundaries, which alienate, separate, and divide us within our own selves.

Lastly, I will investigate how Vassanji draws our attention to the gaps and silences in any given narrative through the condition of subalternity and marginality. Through the elusive and unrevealed histories of these characters, which incessantly and insistently haunt the annals of official history in the form of memories, secrets and oral

histories that never find their way into the historical archive, the novel problematises the construction of a universalised body of knowledge which is selective in what it acknowledges to be ‘factual’ or valid sources of information. The novel shows how the histories of these marginal characters constantly evade attempts to pin them down within the chronology of history, the framework of knowledge, or within the space of a map. Thus they resist being incorporated into historical narrative, and hold in suspension any answer that might allow for their resolution and cause them to be set aside, or locked away in neat parentheses. In an ironic reference to the tenets of Enlightenment empiricism, Fernandes’s student presents a paper on how “What Is Not Observed Does Not Exist” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 92), suggesting that it is, rather, the failure to observe what remains out of sight that constitutes what is simultaneously a blind spot, but also the gap that prevents the closure of knowledge. The chapter will also look at how the manifestation of ghosts, spirits and haunting within the novel serve as a metaphor for subaltern histories—particularly apt for their existence as phenomena that continue to elude, yet plague modern science, raising questions that the powers of rationality and observation are unable to definitely resolve. The splitting of the modern present is accomplished through the glimpses Vassanji gives us into the interstices of Eurocentric history—cracks that pry apart the present narrative, giving way to an excess that signals to us the limitations of humanism and the singular point of view from which the world is constructed in Eurocentric discourse, such as in the case of subaltern histories and memories, which constantly evade attempts to pin them down within the chronology of historical records or within the space of a map.

By demonstrating the complicated and often contradictory negotiations of meaning and identity that take place within the borderlands, Vassanji activates the reader's awareness of how History's excessive 'others' disturb the very premise of the universal eye/I upon which European humanism rests. Unsettled and unsettling, the 'other' is an unruly presence that constitutes but also reveals the arbitrary outer limit of universal knowledge. Always emerging as something more, something other than, the 'other' is what has been cast out, but also that which threatens the borders of selfhood. Alterity and marginality are conditions that suggest other ways of perceiving the world and other possibilities of being, taking us beyond the binaristic logic of hierarchical othering, which fetters and distorts its subjects. The novel makes the point that the 'other' is not just some phantom threat that beats at the self from just outside its borders; it also haunts the self as an unsettling alternative not yet acknowledged. Mariamu's tale of possession suggestively demonstrates the way in which the demonic resides within the domestic, providing the reader with a sense of how this spiritual disturbance is in fact the manifestation of problems within the community, rather than in an afflicted Mariamu. In other words, the "beyond" (1) that Bhabha theorises is also within: abjected histories emerge from the interstices of History, overflow its boundaries, and crack it right open. By signalling the existence of what lies beyond the paradigm of universal humanism, of stories that do not need to end, and meaning which does not need to be foreclosed, excess compels a ceaseless questioning of the present, of the self, allowing for ways out, and other ways of being.

## 2. Fragments and Refractions

### 2.1 Insistence: Sounds and Shards

In rejecting a stable and unitary portrayal of a totalised reality, Vassanji sets out to disturb and unsettle the conventions that govern narrative coherence on the level of the novel's structure. The body of the narrative experiences rupture through the introduction of snippets of poetry, scribbles and musings from private journals, research notes, letters, extracts from official memoranda, and newspaper articles, which disturb the flow of the novel. As a result, the reader is constantly made aware of the different authors and voices who have, in one way or another, become part of *The Book of Secrets*, including but not limited to: Vassanji, its author; Fernandes, who compiles a history of Corbin's diary and is the novel's dominant narrator; Corbin, whose diary entries appear in the text, and who authors the colonial memoir, *Heart and Soul*; Maynard, whose own journal appears in extracts within the book; Fumfratti, whose tales and riddles are told to regale his companions; Rita, whose voice speaks directly to Fernandes and the reader, telling us her story; newspapers from the British and the Germans, disseminating views on events local and foreign; the rumours told by people, which re-tell and re-present past events. Containing within its pages different styles of narration, ranging from a limited, first-person point-of-view to that of a third-person, omniscient narrator, and different modes of address, which are alternately conversational, formal, precise, or elliptical, the novel answers Quayson's call for "a liberatory politics which starts from the literary representation of the political . . . [by liberating] art from all sorts of established perceptions" (Quayson 101). Through its constant switches in context and content, and

the introduction of fragmented voices, the text produces an uneven perspective that unsettles our assumptions about the naturalness of narrative and knowledge.

Vassanji highlights within the novel the existence of books within books; of diaries that contain the traces of voices from elsewhere; of official histories woven through with personal tales. The book of secrets is described in the prologue as a text penned by a single author, yet a communal narrator quickly takes over, its voice superseding that of the original writer. This new, polyphonic speaker tells us that the book has “no end” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 2), which can be taken to mean that the book has no conclusion, but which can also be interpreted as it being a text with no limits or borders. I wish to suggest that both these meanings are active within the novel and that they work together thematically to reveal a world of disjointed knowledges permanently in transit and transmutation. This is demonstrated by the novel’s description of Fumfrutti’s stories, which “continued from a previous night and . . . changed plots and characters” (*ibid* 58). Vassanji draws our attention to the impossibility of conclusion or closure through the issue of authorship, which Fernandes’s student explains as the manner in which “our texts come to us interpolated by succeeding generations—a question of reconstruction” (*ibid* 330). Existing texts get co-opted into new ones, and become part of a process wherein they are constantly rewritten and reinterpreted. Their meaning, therefore, can never be fixed nor absolute; texts are endless, meaning that they are continually in the process of *being written*; and texts are boundless, meaning that they constantly *written over*.

Just as the collective “we” is ingested and carried along by the book of secrets (*ibid* 2), so too, by the end of the novel, has its primary narrator—the history teacher

Fernandes, whose life becomes entangled with the “world which I created” (*ibid* 331)—been likewise devoured, reduced from being its author into a mere actor within the narrative. Yet, whilst Fernandes weaves a narrative of Corbin’s past, the account continues to be interrupted in parts by extracts drawn from Corbin’s diary. Vassanji interweaves Fernandes’s narrative voice with Corbin’s personal notes, which deal with his reflections on life and the day-to-day minutiae of his administration. The direct entrance of Corbin’s voice into the narrative results in an uneasy contrast between his role as the subject of the story, and his role as its creator, who has an active hand in directing the course of events. Vassanji emphasises the presence of books in our lives, and of our lives in books, to undermine the concept of boundaries, of inside and outside, and of ‘self’ and ‘other’. By representing the same incident or character from different vantage points, Vassanji layers interpretation upon interpretation, causing the novel to overflow its boundaries with a plenitude of histories, languages, and knowledges. Narrative and meaning can then be likened to the dance that takes place around the maypole during the Shamsi celebration, a “dizzying motion, the weaving and unweaving” of various threads (*ibid* 42), demonstrating a continual process of movement and reconstitution. For instance, “[a] young English naturalist and sportsman” who had “borrowed a large sum” repays his loan at a discount by releasing to Jamali, his watchdog, “some of his father’s money” (*ibid* 26-7). This Englishman is later identified by Fernandes as one Sir Henry Johnson, who, in “the introduction to his published diaries”, portrays himself in a respectable light, making no mention of his debt, whereas Jamali, his debt-collector, is cast as “a rascal” who “seduced a young convert” (*ibid* 94). Similarly, Pipa remembers Hamisi, his benefactor, as being kindly and generous, whereas

the information provided in Maynard's "Intelligence Supplement 117/16" depicts Hamisi as a dangerous individual who "maintained links with seditious elements in Egypt and the Sudan" (*ibid* 183). By offering other points of view that contradict or diverge from representations in public or official discourse, the text produces a sense of alienation, strangeness, and unease. Our position undergoes dislocation as we enter into "a peripheral existence in the world" through which a "double vision" is engendered (Quayson 141). Familiar, yet not, we are caught within the borderlands between two worlds, struck by the haunting echo of a recurring idea that returns differently inflected each time.

The subversion of narrational authority is most marked when Rita's own voice cuts into the text, not only to speak on her own behalf, but also to engage in an active dialogue with Fernandes, to answer his questions, and to raise queries of her own. Rather than result in a "neat unfolding towards eventual resolution and finality", Rita's story constitutes "a navigation through a potential vortex of voices" (Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* 26). Significantly, Rita's narrative is interspersed with interjections from Fernandes, who comments to her, "you made it eventually, didn't you, Rita" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 284), converting the hitherto unbroken flow of her monologue into a dialogue, a back-and-forth between two voices sharing one space, communicating with, reflecting off, and responding to each another. Rita and Fernandes each provide their perspective on the same events, such as their almost-meeting at the mosque in Britain, with her accusing, "you stayed away, nursing a wound that had no right to be there in the first place", while he admits, "I was afraid of what you could do to me. Perhaps I *should* have come to you" (*ibid* 286). While these points of view may occasionally clash, their

dialogue also creates the possibility of reconciliation and understanding. As Rita's tale hurtles on, it dominates the chapter and retains an independent presence within the overall structure of Fernandes's narrative. In a final gesture, Rita declares the right of inheritance over all that has come before—Fernandes's research, as well as Corbin's diary—and claims them as her own. Thus she tells her former teacher, "Let it be, this past. The diary and the stories that surround it are now mine, to bury" (*ibid* 298).

Rita is a character who refuses to be laid bare, to have her secrets exposed, and who provides no denouement. When quizzed by Fernandes on the details of her life, she "declines to comment" (*ibid* 292), thus deflecting the demands of narrative convention, which require a final explication that will shed light on the mysteries at the heart of the novel. Even her account is in many parts incomplete and imprecise in its details, trailing off into nothingness and an adamant silence, such as when she describes a suspicious contract that Ali obtains "from some Arab businessman. . . there was quite an uproar about it later—all kinds of claims, not true really. . ." (*ibid* 289). The elliptical nature of her speech, and the way in which she never confirms or denies the various questions raised by Fernandes, evinces the text's resistance to producing closure, and its refusal to neatly tie up the various narrative threads, even when the information we seek hovers so tantalisingly close in the form of what answers Rita—Ali's ex-wife, and Mariamu's daughter-in-law—may provide. The novel ultimately denies modernity's taxonomic impulse, which seeks only to dissect what lies before it, to tear open and lay bare its subject, all in order to locate it within knowledge, to preserve it like an insect trapped in amber, and thus control it. Rita's story and Mariamu's story (which I will discuss later) are narratives that avoid becoming co-opted through their refusal to provide us with an



answer. However, unlike Mariamu, Rita's resistance is vocal; it insists on self-representation; it makes demands of its own, embodying a form of autonomy which Mariamu, in her position as a subaltern, in her muteness and her death, could only symbolise within the novel, but not personally experience.

Insisting on the irreducibility of identity, Rita asserts that the secrets which are hers to hold will not be revealed simply to satisfy the voyeurism that an omniscient narrator takes as his prerogative (and which the historian presumes to be his task)—namely, the stripping away of time and privacy in order to put another person's secrets and shames on display, while keeping his own concealed. By staking her claim over the past, the stories, and the hinted-at secrets which comprise it, Rita firmly signals to us that these events are not for the cold eye of the historian, not for him to dissect and sniff over, Fisi-like, in this prurient and speculative fashion, and not for him to project his own fears and fantasies over in a manner that objectifies, diminishes and entraps the subject. Fernandes's burning curiosity for the answers to his questions "about this girl who has made such a place for herself around her—Mariamu—who stole the Englishman's diary and like that book refuses to be buried ... And, most important ... who was Ali's father?" (*ibid* 293) are finally answered only by Rita's rebuke that "[i]f you cannot know these things about yourself ... what arrogance, Fernandes, to presume to peep into other lives ... There are questions that have no answer; we can never know the innermost secrets of any heart" (*ibid* 297). Rather than being the key to the final revelation, expected near the conclusion of the novel, Rita provides a reversed gaze that turns fully upon the narrator instead, turning him into "the subject" (*ibid*), and uncovering secrets that Fernandes himself had not been aware of, such as how "[w]hat was between you and Gregory ...

only you know that. If you do” (*ibid*). The body of Rita’s chapter is that which cracks open the narrative, interrupting Fernandes’s authority over the text, and which finally draws him fully into the open, “exposed to my own inquiry” (*ibid* 8).

In a final admonition, Rita disparages Fernandes’s desire to “join [events] like so many dots to form a picture”, telling him that “[e]ach dot is infinity . . . your history is surface” (*ibid* 297). The reader’s focus is drawn to how individual dots comprise a constellation of identity through examples such as Fernandes’s description of the “[p]assports, driver’s licenses, books of every kind, magazines, letters, handwritten manuscripts—all . . . these pieces of jettisoned lives” (*ibid* 5). The grouping of these different objects alerts us to how the paper trail of a person’s existence constitutes, to a certain extent, the narrative of their life. These documents reflect the various facets of a personality, ranging from national identity, represented in the passport, to social identity, reflected in a driver’s license, to our cultural milieu, reflected in the books and magazines. Our personal lives are embodied in the letter, and our creative and artistic instincts, our desire to create stories of our own and to shape the world, are symbolised by the handwritten manuscripts. Yet, at the same time, the fact that these markers of identity are described as ‘pieces’, disjointed and fragmentary, raises the possibility that there are other documents missing from the picture. The novel suggests that just as the full and complex reality of a person cannot be reduced to a passport, or a license, or a letter, so too would it be limiting to assume that identity or truth is comprised solely of what pieces of information we have managed to discover at the present time. The fallability and fallacy of logic and deduction is demonstrated in the episode of the boys who attempt to uncover Parviz’s indiscretions. They follow a paper trail, which starts

with the notes, “two pieces of paper . . . one . . . a note from Romeo”, dropped by Karim Lando, the town crier (*ibid* 256). The boys then consult with Gregory, from whom they seek his interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*, and who “obliged by giving chapter and verse, more quotations, a literary evaluation, the story, and the meaning of the lines . . . (‘Young love knows no barriers, no strictures’)” (*ibid* 257), demonstrating the manner in which what has become enshrined as the definitive meaning can nevertheless fail to explain the complex reality of a situation. Knowledge, put differently, cannot be grounded in the universal, and instead has to be subject to a consideration of the context from which facts emerge. Thus, when the youths attempt to piece together the fragmented clues they have gathered, “[t]he couple they caught in their net . . . was another one” and not Ali and Rita (*ibid* 257). By drawing our attention to the particularity of each couple’s situation, Vassanji makes a deeper point about how, in spite of their similarities, identity cannot be reduced to a series of arbitrarily-joined dots, suggesting what Jones refers to as “a compulsion to understand these relationships as . . . unique in their individually complex dynamics . . . but [also] as more common and generally accepted than is . . . known or acknowledged” (178).

Vassanji turns our attention instead to the density and richness of the dots, each constituting a point of recollection, in Gregory’s book of poems, *Havin’ a Piece*. Ranging from comic interludes to expressions of anger or longing, his poetry brings “back many memories of Dar as it used to be” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 317). The novel emphasises how these pieces of writing, “haphazardly distributed throughout the volume” (*ibid* 318), conjure the past more vividly than any coherently-formed narrative might through their brevity and lack of specificity. Oblique, elliptical, and yet evocative

precisely because of their scattered and piecemeal form, they resurrect in sharp, bright flashes a sense of the town and its past.<sup>1</sup> The reality thus rendered by these shards of truth is not a smooth surface reflection or mimetic reproduction, but a cracked and shattered mirror which incompletely and imprecisely reveals to us different facets or dimensions of its subject. In contrast, the metropolises of Empire are envisaged by Pipa as being paved with “streets of glass” and saturated with “perfumed air” (*ibid* 155). The glass streets, which possess a clear and glossy surface, suggest a way of knowing the world that abhors pieces and fragments, and which seeks to gild over the real through a discourse which casts out what is excessive and extraneous in order to present a smooth and unbroken image of itself. This desire for an ordered reality, evinced by the demarcation of fences that shut out the chaos of Mombasa town, with its “smells of overripe pineapples and mangoes, the open drains, animal droppings” (*ibid* 16-7), reminds us that while perfumes smell pleasant, they are also employed to mask less palatable odours.

On the subject of contamination, Cohen states, “[p]ollution is not simply the opposite of cleanliness; it also arises out of a *confusion* of categories” (xi), suggesting the threat posed by the openness of boundaries, wherein truth cannot be fixed, and instead must remain permanently suspended and subject to revision or reinterpretation. It is therefore significant that the senses most prominently assailed within the novel are those of smell and also of sound. The aural penetration of barriers (not to mention the boundaries that we erect to distance ourselves) is demonstrated when Gregory, at the moment of Amin’s death, “heard a scream, piercing through walls, through hearts”

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<sup>1</sup> Thus Fernandes comes to realise that “[t]he box contains . . . the debris of a life; but this debris is also a wealth” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 320).

(Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 280).<sup>2</sup> Contrasted against sight, the tyrannical eye/I of Enlightenment rationality and the distanced (and distancing) historian, smell and sound are subversive elements that are not easily contained or blocked out. They travel and creep in between the borders of the ‘self’, uninvited, unhomely, unwelcome. Kristeva states that through the process of abjection, “‘subject’ and ‘object’ push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable”. And so Corbin, when confronted by the abject odours of feces, corruption and decay, experiences a threat to his identity through the destabilising movement brought about by the smells and sounds of Mobasa market. Perhaps in some ways I overstate the effects of Corbin’s shopping expedition; yet, as an immigrant newly arrived in Africa, Fernandes too is subject to sounds that reach him through the walls,<sup>3</sup> and Corbin is haunted by the foreign notes and timbres of religious chants.<sup>4</sup> Vassanji posits smell and sound as subversive functions, which are capable of transgressing the boundaries erected to preserve colonial identity and authority. As alternatives to the totalising logic of observation and rationality, which rely primarily on the organ of sight, sounds and smells drift throughout the novel, defying barriers, eluding fixity, and resisting representation.

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<sup>2</sup> The novel further reinforces the point by suggesting that it is this heart-breaking scream which compels Gregory to attend Amin’s funeral, a moment wherein the Englishman’s affiliations to the Shamsi “community he served” are crystallised (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 280).

<sup>3</sup> “I have not felt so alone, so away, in years. . . . Outside, the music still plays. Downstairs in the lobby two men talk earnestly in the bar, their voices carry clearly and without inhibition. There comes the sound of water” (*ibid* 175).

<sup>4</sup> “. . . a light breeze blew in through the open window; there was a mosque not far off, from which the muezzin’s ‘Allahu Akber’ presently came through clearly. Below, from the courtyard of the building came the sounds of boys playing, men chatting on stone benches by the little garden” (*ibid* 19-20).

Vassanji draws on memory to illustrate the subjectivity and variability of experience and recollection, which cannot be incorporated into the linearity of historical narrative. The elusiveness of memory, and its tendency to be overlooked in the annals of official historical records, is evinced within the novel when Fernandes is told that there are no more local wazees who remember the war, as “[t]he last one died just six weeks ago. I doubt you will find anyone else” (*ibid* 176).<sup>5</sup> It is through coincidence, rather than by investigation or deduction, that Fernandes is informed by Young Jamali that “his father was alive, was in Moshi”, on “[Fernandes’s] last day there” (*ibid* 179). The son of Jamali the mukhi of Kikono, and Mariamu’s first cousin, the old man “has a confused memory of the war. He mentions it with the Maji-Maji uprising. But he was born after Maji-Maji” (*ibid* 180). The misty recollections of Young Jamali’s father, with their imprecise placement of time, and even outright contradictions to recorded historical events, undermine the surety of historicism. Memory functions in the novel as an alternative way of knowing oneself and the world, which destabilises the straightforward trajectory drawn by a universal conception of history by focusing instead upon the intensely personal and specific nature of individual experience, perception and remembrance. Unlike the bottle-book of colonial European history, which seeks to contain, memory is, to employ the old adage from a different angle, a sieve—a container full of holes, which allows for the free passage and movement of various elements, literally enacted within the text when the old man “picks up the pan of water . . . and

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<sup>5</sup> It is no coincidence that James subsequently takes Fernandes to “the highest point in the town, looking out upon the entire countryside for miles in all directions” (*ibid* 176), emphasising the omniscient Enlightenment ideal that assumes the disembodied and rational eye, which observes events from above. And yet, once upon the ground, Fernandes and his party begin to “walk around in different directions, pulled separately and privately by the awesome panorama” (*ibid*), evincing a method of exploration that is neither linear nor rational.

carefully pours the liquid out, spreading it about on the earth, which drinks it up” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 180). In spite of memory’s confusion of time, the impressions it leaves, like those engendered by Gregory’s poems, are nevertheless undeniable, irresistible.

The novel’s “[t]races of stories, myths and memories transform history into inscriptions, history into a re-writing” (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 40), foregrounding the pressing need to re-evaluate the status of ‘truth’, knowledge, and perhaps even scholarship. Despite being “[a]n inconclusive battle”, as stated by Fernandes’s student (an academic), there is “much at stake” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 330). Fernandes’s student describes the tensions that have emerged between “traditionalists” and “academics” over the discovery of how “bhajans (hymns, gyans), which have been considered exclusive property of a religious community, with specific attribution of authorship, did in fact belong to a milieu, a collective—think of what that does to people for whom every word has been considered sacred” (*ibid* 92). Vassanji deftly illustrates, with this scenario, the dangers of idealising or essentialising a nativist past, even as he points out how institutional knowledge, which operates along concealed vectors of culture-specific bias, can also work to essentialise or trivialise its ‘others’, evinced when Fernandes’s student refers to the “traditionalists (dare one call them fundamentalists yet?)” (*ibid*). On the subject of realism, Ermarth states that “[t]he realistic narrator’s function . . . is to homogenize the medium. . . . The narrative perspective maintains a similar continuity in time, and thus establishes a similar potential for agreement among multiple consciousnesses” (40). Yet the very structure of the narrative, which works within but also outside the constraints of the ‘realistic narrator’,

reveals how ‘realism’ is itself a stylised form; time is not experienced in a linear fashion, and the establishment of sequence and temporality, and direction and progress, is more an artificial construction than it is something that arises organically out of the past. Despite Fernandes’s desire to “[begin] a history, with an objective eye on the diary of Alfred Corbin”, he eventually, almost helplessly, starts to incorporate other personalities from his own present into his writing, prompting him to muse on the manner in which “[f]irst Rita, then Gregory, . . . have entered my narrative, unasked” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 233). The stories within the text are connected to one another through jumps across pages, and also across time. Vassanji leads us to an understanding of how our knowledge of these events accretes, as if in layers, through the multiple connections that these tales make to one another. There are many such instances within the novel—Fumfrutti’s story of the baboons and the mzungu who kills them for the sake of his dog (Vassanji 56-7), for example, turns out to be a story about Maynard, which reappears further on in the novel as an excerpt from Maynard’s own journals, described as “[a]n incident in which a dog gets killed by baboons” (*ibid* 94). The slight but telling difference in emphasis between the two stories, one in which baboons are killed by a mzungu, and the other in which a dog is killed by baboons, clarifies Vassanji’s point about how connections and variations only serve to complicate the homogenised medium of any form of discourse, emphasising the great potential for tensions between multiple consciousnesses. An example of this can be found in the thorny issue regarding the ownership of Corbin’s diary. In tracing of the circuitous routes of history, and the uncanny convergence of the threads of destiny and fate, the novel evinces the difficulty in determining “[w]ho owns the diary” (*ibid* 229)—not necessarily in a legal sense, but, as



Fernandes observes of Rita's impassioned defense of Pipa, as a "moral right" (*ibid* 227-8). Even Fernandes, who inherits all of Gregory's personal possessions, is at least partially entitled to a claim over the diary, for Corbin conveys in a letter to Gregory, "I told Burnes that in the . . . event of his finding my diary, he was to place it in your hands" (*ibid* 322). Perhaps all who have come into contact with the history of the diary have, to some degree, a right to it, which include "Feroz with finder's privilege", "Rita . . . the heir", and "Corbin's heirs" as well (*ibid* 229). However, this is an issue further complicated by the ambiguous lines of parentage in the case of Ali, who could be either Pipa, Corbin or Rashid's natural son. As Toron observes, "national, racial, and gendered patterns of reproduction are confused and subverted because of the mystery surrounding Ali's paternity" (7), thus raising the question of whose heir? Whose history? Whose story is being told?

## 2.2 Interventions: Re-citations and Re-sitations

Turning to Conrad's canonical novel, *Heart of Darkness*, we see the authority of the book invoked through Marlow's discovery of *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship* (Conrad 100). Describing how its "illustrative diagrams and . . . tables of figures . . . [its] talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real" (*ibid*), Conrad contrasts the reality, productivity, and creativity of European industry and commerce, the "luminous (*ibid*) beacon of civilisation which it represents, against the entropic "stillness of life . . . an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" (*ibid* 95) embodied within the wildness of the African landscape. I mention Conrad

because it is through references to portrayals of Africa within *The Heart of Darkness* that Vassanji structures his response to the Western canon, by re-presenting the continent through a series of refractions that re-interpret and re-inflect the themes of Conrad's writing. Turning first to Conrad's novel, we see that Marlow is plagued by "the tremor of far-off drums . . . a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild" (*ibid* 76); he describes to the reader the "high stillness of primeval forest . . . before my eyes" (*ibid* 85); and is confronted by "[t]he prehistoric man . . . a thing monstrous and free . . . [t]hey howled . . . the terrible frankness of that noise . . . from the night of first ages" (*ibid* 97-8). Suggestive of an Africa rooted in primitivity, both the land and its inhabitants are described by Conrad as concealing "a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart" (*ibid* 94). In *The Book of Secrets*, Corbin too hears "mysterious drums in the night" (Vassanji 75), and the pressing desire to discover their source leads him into a place that initially seems eerie, replete with the primeval threat of Africa as evoked by Conrad. Vassanji describes how Corbin enters into "[t]he cool shade, the tall, still tree trunks crowd him, the silence so deep he could hear his heart beat, his breath draw. Only when he looked directly above him did this darkness seem to have any limit—birds flying, leaves fluttering, sunlight trickling in" (*ibid* 76). At the same time, however, Vassanji points to the impossibility of such darkness as a fixed and eternal essence of the land. The gaps and cracks within the canopy let in beams of sunlight; birds flit amidst the branches; leaves part to reveal glimpses of the sky. The novel also tells us of how the forest "follows a seasonal stream" (*ibid* 75), suggesting a zone that cannot be straightforwardly demarcated or contained; constantly in flux, the confines of the forest expand and contract in the course of the seasons. Even the stream that surrounds the

forest has “several ways of crossing” (*ibid* 76), attesting to the flexibility and porosity of boundaries. The moon, which in Conrad’s novel “spread over everything a thin layer of silver—over the rank grass, over the mud, upon the wall of matted vegetation” (Conrad 85), evokes sensations of heaviness, decay and stillness; Vassanji counters this with images of sunlight that breaks “into shimmering fragments upon the water surface” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 76).

Later, when Corbin emerges into the clearing at the heart of the woods, the site of where “the drumbeats of a few weeks ago had come down to oppress him”, the place turns out to be far from sinister.<sup>6</sup> He is greeted with friendly shouts and shown hospitality, and he realises that “[i]t seemed so ordinary, like dozen of villages he had seen” (*ibid* 76-7). As he prepares to leave, Corbin reflects that “There were layers of life here clearly inaccessible to him, deliberately hidden from him” (*ibid* 77), pointing towards the ways in which the impenetrability and unknowability of the ‘other’ functions as a form of resistance within Vassanji’s novel. In another instance, the novel describes how, upon his arrival in Africa, Corbin is abruptly overwhelmed by the vast and irreducible reality that is Africa, which takes the form of the “darkest, blackest night that simply shut out the world of European Mombasa” (*ibid* 22). “[T]he huge and dark continent that had defied the rest of the world for millennia” is perceived by Corbin to be full of indiscernible shadows, and his confusion over whether what he sees are “trees or some species of wildlife” (*ibid* 23) plays out the text’s rejection of reductive categories of knowledge, through which the ‘other’ is tamed and made acceptable and accessible. The

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<sup>6</sup> Later in the text, Vassanji brings back “the deep, lugubrious dhoom-dhoom-dhoom of a dhol and two trumpets blasting variations of the same ten notes in a wonderfully mellifluous refrain” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 249), recasting the mysterious and threatening drumbeats as part of a joyful Shamsi parade, accompanied by floats, dancing, feasting and much merriment.

incapacity of language to comprehensively and satisfactorily encapsulate the whole is also demonstrated by the mbuyu or baobab tree in Kikono's town square, which constitutes a site of multiple significances. It is ghostly, but also a "shady meeting place" (*ibid* 25); it represents the community in its lighter aspects, such as when it is decorated during festivals, but is named "the hand of Satan" (*ibid* 70), and reputed to house Shetani and the spirits of the dead (*ibid* 71). Like the mixed community of Indians, Swahilis, "vendors, servants, and occasional labourers, and, with them, tribesmen and women from the neighbouring area" (*ibid* 26) that grows up around it, the mbuyu tree possesses a hybridised and complex nature.

Therefore, Corbin observes that "as soon as I sat down with paper and pen I realized how futile it was ... to conjure up England out of a night in Africa" (*ibid* 22). The novel's description of how darkness overwhelms narrativisation, description and knowledge suggests that the African night can only be known on its own terms, even as it points to the flimsiness of the idea of England, which falters when displaced into an alien setting. The darkness, far from being associated with some inherent trait of the landscape, instead becomes reconceived as a site of resistance within the novel, which defies interpretation, the imposition of meaning, and its stabilisation within the field of knowledge. The novel reveals how the 'universal' logic of empiricism possesses an incomplete and certainly insufficient understanding of the land and its inhabitants, which cannot be accessed and understood merely in terms of "scientific objectivism" (*ibid* 52). By rejecting the possibility of being boxed in or summarised from within a rationalist, 'universal' framework of understanding, *The Book of Secrets* constitutes a response to Conrad with his descriptions of the darkness of Africa, with its mysterious, malevolent

drumbeats, and its natives, who are portrayed as being little better than animals. Vassanji accomplishes this by providing an-other perspective that resituates the European point of view, placing it amidst a jumble of voices and ways of being in the world. The notion of a timeless and unchanging Africa—that “place of darkness” (Conrad 59), bearing “the unseen presence of victorious corruption, the darkness of an impenetrable night” (Conrad 134) —is contrasted against the cultural and, above all, *historical* landscape of Vassanji’s Africa. Chambers points out the ways in which the so-called ‘timeless’ cultures of the colonised actually emerged from long internal histories of change and conflict, and states that “[t]he disturbance of the idea of stable cultural formations located in the mythic time of ‘primitive’ societies comes to be countered by the evidence of ... historical spaces traversed by migrations, movements and shifting territorial claims and confines, both before and after ‘first contact’ with Europeans” (*Culture After Humanism* 17-8). The Shamsi community, with its migrations and movements that span the continent, testifies to the vibrant and always-already hybrid reality that is Africa’s past and present, countering Conrad’s image of an Africa belonging “to the beginnings of time” (Conrad 104). It is through this “process of displacement and differentiation (absence/presence, representation/repetition)” (Bhabha 75) that *The Book of Secrets* effects a disturbance of the authority of the Western canon.

Corbin himself observes that colonial European values are only considered as an extraneous opinion, a curiosity, during his administration of the town, demonstrating the problem of reception, which renders the process of domination by the colonisers over the colonised questionable at best. Rather than receive European rule and its values exactly as they are transmitted or intended, the reception takes place through a series of

translations and mis-readings. The inadequacy of Eurocentric knowledge when applied to the colonial situation is demonstrated when Corbin speaks of the “irritating little petitions from the people that so often stumped government regulations” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 36), evincing the impossible task of attempting to transplant one set of cultural norms into an unfamiliar context. During the course of his tenure as the “police chief, magistrate, doctor, tax collector and . . . surveyor” of Kikono, he reflects upon the difficulty of convincing the villagers to “abandon their own laws, their universes, for a European view of being”, giving voice to not only the process of negotiation required within the colonial context, but also to the context-specific (rather than universal) nature of the process of “British justice” that he administers, likening it to “constructing a marble edifice, irrelevant and alien to the people governed by their own laws and ways of doing things” (*ibid* 31-2). In acknowledging his suspicions that he was “often used as . . . a test, or for an opinion, while the real, the binding decisions on the cases were taken elsewhere by tribal councils”, Corbin inadvertently manages, with his words, to decentre the universal truth of an European system of knowledge, placing it amongst a number of other “universes” and other “view[s] of being” (*ibid* 31-2).

Young compellingly suggests that “History is the realm of violence and war; it constitutes another form by which the other is appropriated into the same. For the other to remain other it must not derive its meaning from History but must instead have a separate time which differs from historical time” (*White Mythologies* 47). Vassanji places emphasis on this separate time, the “cracks . . . in discourse through which agency may operate” (Ashcroft, *On Post-Colonial Futures* 111), by having supernatural effects provide the reasoning behind otherwise inexplicable events, from Desouza’s curse,

which, “for the past four or five years in succession [caused] a boy from his Standard XI class [to die] in an accident”, to “a belief in town that every year the ocean claimed one young soul for its own” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 269). Even against the backdrop of a country entering into the homogeneous, empty space of nations, the transition to Independence, “the hour of uhuru—freedom” (*ibid* 278), the novel maintains the awareness of a asynchronous reality in which a “postcolonial *contra-modernity* . . . contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it” inheres (Bhabha 9). Thus, when Amin is hit on the back of the head, Pipa objects vociferously, for “[h]itting on the head was dangerous, it could bring on a spirit, cause madness”; and against all logic, “[a]fter this, it seemed, Amin often complained of headaches” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 279). By focusing on “the cultural hybridity of . . . borderline conditions to 'translate', and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity” (Bhabha 9), Vassanji offers us fragmented glimpses into other times and other spaces, which exist alongside, yet differently from, Western modernity to suggest other ways of knowing and being in the world. This is demonstrated in the novel’s description of the “Hindu ceremony to which [Aku’s] father took him one night”, where the boy beholds a “thin, dark brown man” who sits with a lightbulb that “hung not far from him above his head, creating an aura around him” amidst “thick incense fumes and the tinkle and jangle of bells and tambourines and a chanting of people” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 209-10). The man seems to undergo a religiously-inspired fit and pulls another lightbulb from his mouth, “a glowing object which so grotesquely filled his mouth”, appearing first as “a dim light” appearing “from the back of his throat” (*ibid* 210). The lightbulb, an emblem of rationalism and secular European modernity, is

reproduced within this scene as the paraphernalia of a Hindu religious ritual, subjecting it to re-interpretation and translation.

Bhabha points to the way in which signifiers of colonial authority suffer the displacement of their original meaning as they are “repeated, translated, misread” (89) within the site of enunciation. When Pipa learns to read from Aku, the novel shows how he is not concerned about being educated in Western ways so much as he desires to “read the book: one word in it” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 212)—specifically, to recognise Mariamu’s name in Corbin’s diary. Vassanji subverts the authority of the book through his examples of how narratives and the meaning they convey inevitably shift as they undergo the process of translation and repetition. This is enacted through Pipa, who is shown “tearing up an old copy of the *Herald* for his packets” (*ibid* 204), evincing the literal fragmentation of Empire’s discourse as it is filtered through the lens of local reception. Local variations of European folk stories illustrate how familiar narratives undergo mutation and change within the colonial context. Fernandes tells the reader that there “are many Dick Whittington stories from the colonies with ironic twists to them” (*ibid* 270). Described as “Dar and derivative” (*ibid* 252), a spin-off from the main source, the existence of these refracted narratives function as disruptions that render the status of the original tale uncertain, threatening to subsume it within a multitude of familiar, yet different—uncanny—echoes. These local interpretations and negotiations of canonised tales from the metropolis reroute the trajectory of their parent text, modifying its contents and taking its plot in other directions. In a similar fashion, when *Romeo and Juliet* is mentioned during class, the students begin to chip in with “the many variations of Romeo and Juliet” (*ibid* 255), local permutations that inflect Shakespeare’s play through different



lenses. The existence of these local variations cast a dizzying array of refractions, causing “the linear transmission of a clear and coherent ‘message’, is overtaken and subsumed in the traces, in the tracing, of heterogeneous worldly states” (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 19).

Vassanji’s post-colonial revision of the past is marked out by how, when Fernandes asks of his tour-guide, James, “Does anyone care about the history ... does it matter?”, James laments, “not to the local public, alas” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 177). In the novel, the “Great War, the war of the Europeans” comes to be narrated by the residents of Kikono as “a great riddle composed of many smaller riddles”, such that “the telling of the war was often the telling of riddles” (*ibid* 109). Riddles are indirect tales, oblique references, with many possible answers. The very structure of a riddle is one that invites response, for riddles rely upon an open dialogue and the exchange of opinions. Riddles and joking are also subversive, for, as Ali realises, “[j]oking, you can be a child, a brother, a lover” (*ibid* 250). The fantasy and fiction of jokes, the construction of a humorous narrative which is not to be taken seriously, opens up a space that is vulnerable to transgression, for its status of frivolity ironically allows one to operate much more freely. The comedic element inherent in riddles, which are nonsensical, often farcical, and seemingly illogical, with their descriptions of bushes moving, anthills smoking, and trees pissing, reduce the ostensibly implacable momentum of war and conflict between the nations to a series of absurd exchanges, which elude logic and understanding. In so doing, the novel reduces the struggle of the colonising nations to a vast and incomprehensible joke, “the mischief of the mzungus” (*ibid* 109). The proliferation of alternate knowledges and the polyphony they generate result in an excess

of meaning and noise, which overwhelms and de-centres the discourse of universal humanism, demonstrated in how the centrally dispersed “[n]ewspapers from Nairobi and Mombasa were slow to arrive”, whereas “rumours came faster; speculation grew” (*ibid* 189).

In being re-presented, the same object can undergo a near-infinite number of transformations, such as in the instance of “an adaptation of *Pygmalion* written by Fletcher using an idea of Gregory’s” (*ibid* 308), which in turn was derived from George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, a play inspired by the original Greek myth. Vassanji shows how existing texts come to be inscribed upon by new ones; they are taken apart, moulded, and re-shaped to fit new contexts, new times, and the meanings they demand. Gregory, who raises the suggestion of “using a native girl in the role of Elisa Dolittle”, a Cockney girl, attempts to rearticulate Shaw’s questions about the security and identity of whiteness along the boundaries of race instead of class (*ibid* 232). Vassanji himself, by consciously choosing to reference the myth of Pygmalion, makes a point about how the ‘other’, through which the identity of the ‘self’ is stabilised, cannot be contained. Like the statue of Galatea, in which is manifested the “desire to see, to fix cultural difference in a containable, *visible* object” (Bhabha 72), these narratives and discourses that constitute a mirror to the self, once told, come to life; they move, they breathe; they escape their creators, change, and keep growing.

### 2.3 Expeditions: Mixing and Movement

Instances of movements and migrations abound within the novel. Corbin, for instance, grows up “in Stockholm and Prague and Hamburg”, travels around Europe,

“from London to Hamburg via Paris”, enters the Colonial Service in “East Africa”, then finally returns to England after retiring (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 12-3). Jamali the mukhi chases a bad debt all the way from “the ancient port of Lamu on the Indian Ocean” to “Zanzibar . . . Bagamoyo . . . Moshi and Taveta and finally to . . . Taita country” (*ibid* 26-7), before establishing the town of Kikono, then spends his last days Moshi.

Fernandes himself, the book’s primary narrator, is a Christian Goan who emigrates from Goa in India to Africa, settling there. Even territorial markers are constantly being transgressed and displaced. The novel describes how “Amin Mansion went up with . . . others on Kichwele Street, the Indian street that braved its way into the African section, Kariakoo” (*ibid* 264), demonstrating the shifting and protean nature of the landscape. Vassanji alerts the reader to the fact that cultures, cities, and countries—far from being stable or homogeneous groupings—all bear histories of crossings, mixing and change. Ali’s defiant observation, “weren’t the Normans nouveau once? And didn’t the English live in caves once” (*ibid* 289) point to the way in which cultural hybridity has emerged from waves of immigration and conquest throughout the history of the world. Similarly, references in the novel to how “a woman from [Thomas’s] people was once Queen of Mombasa . . . during Portuguese times” (*ibid* 23), and that “the old name of Mombasa was Mvita, for war” (*ibid* 16), focus our attention on Mombasa as “a city with long traditions, and multitudes of tribes, castes, races” (*ibid* 221).

*The Book of Secrets* demonstrates how the Shamsi community, as a diasporic community with Indian roots and connections and persist into the present, flexibly adapts to its environment, picking up local cultural practices in the course of its migrations and incorporating them into its traditions. This is evinced by the ancient goddess ritual that

provides the basis for contemporary forms of religious celebration (*ibid* 259), and Pipa's shrine to Mariamu contains "markings on the floor ... with blue, white, red and yellow patterns ... for good luck", but also bears "[o]n the lintel ... a verse from the Quran" (*ibid* 218), demonstrating a hybridised approach to religion and belief. The parade of floats created for the "Shamsi parade", reflecting the community's hybrid sources of influence, comprises of a "larger-than-life Churchill", "an Arab sheikh in a decadent posture in a very Oriental setting", a "snake-charmer", "a mountain with Hassan bin Sabbah", and "Hollywood, complete with sparkling stars" (*ibid* 247-8), suggesting how the present is constituted by an uneven mix of past adaptations and current circumstances, as well as internal and external influences, and the appearances of these "popular and subversive cultural formations within the nation-state . . . re-tell the Asian experience as versions, not of official history of the nation, which is hegemonic and exclusionary, but of those dynamic, multidirectional, and revolutionary histories of the national people" (Simatei 57). Constituting a rich and colourful patchwork of customs derived from different settings, the hybridity of the Shamsis are reflected the very make-up of its members, and demonstrated in the aid and acceptance provided to transients such as Pipa, who "did not know where he himself had been born or when, in any calendar, German, Arabic, or Indian" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 127), but who eventually comes to identify with the community. Even the town of Kikono itself, where Jamali's community is established, is comprised of "Indians . . . Swahilis . . . vendors, servants, and occasional labourers, and . . . tribesmen and women from the neighbouring area", to say nothing of Corbin himself, the "new representative of the King" (*ibid* 26). The fluidity and adaptability of the community is emphasised in how, when the rigid borders of nation

begin to work against their interest, “[t]he Shamsis . . . now in large numbers began to pack up and leave for North America” where greater opportunities awaited them (*ibid* 314). Vassanji draws the reader’s attention to the mobility of the Shamsis in order to suggest how their transgressive power is located in its acts of border-crossing, whether these be boundaries of a national, cultural, or even racial nature.

Bhabha observes that “the intervention of the ‘beyond’ . . . establishes a boundary: a bridge, where ‘presencing’ begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world – the unhomeliness – that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (13). The “beyond” he theorises is not a destination so much as it is a link that facilitates “an exploratory, restless movement . . . *au delà – here and there, on all sides, fort / da, hither and thither, back and forth*” (*Bhabha 2*). Mirroring the back and forth passage of identity and being, the example of the “Swahili girl called Hannah . . . [who] reconverted [from Christianity] to Islam and reverted to her original name Khanoum” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 27), invokes not a linear movement but “images of multiple journeys” (Brah, “Thinking Through the Concept of Diaspora” 443), of departures but also returns. Like the landscape, identities change but also accumulate as we travel; thus Fernandes realises that Gregory’s “other incarnations reside in Lagos and Khartoum” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 270), causing him to reflect upon “how little we know those around us, how much less we knew then” (*ibid* 127). The disorientation and confusion of direction suggested by Bhabha, the transgression of borders of identity, is evoked within the novel by the tentative but distinct blurring of zones, be they personal, geographical, or cultural. Characters who bear multiple names suggest the varied identities and cultural contexts for

which these names are created. Nurmohamed, for example, comes to be known as Pipa; Aku becomes Ali Akber Ali; Gulnar takes on the name of Rita.

Vassanji employs the estranging effects of relocation and movement in order to cast the narratives of colonial knowledge into disarray. The disturbances of the colonised, through the “*menace of mimicry . . . its double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority*” (Bhabha 155), are embodied in the character of Thomas, who is worth discussing for the many ways in which he functions as a destabilising presence within the system of colonial discourse. Thomas’s domineering attitude towards Corbin—which the latter complainingly yet passively refers to as the behavior of “an overprotective and domineering mother hen” (*ibid* 45), in spite of their respective roles as employee and employer—inverts the power relations between colonised and coloniser, resulting in the disruption of colonial authority. Perceived through Corbin’s eyes, he is the very image of the subservient and eager-to-please native when they first meet; Thomas introduces himself “with a restrained smile” and speaks in a “soft voice” (*ibid* 14). Corbin’s sense of his control over the situation, however, quickly deteriorates when he discovers that Thomas has appropriated his funds rather cavalierly in order to expedite their progress through Customs, and belatedly realises that “the special treatment . . . had cost five rupees” (*ibid* 15). This incident sets the tone for the ensuing relationship, for Corbin writes frequently afterwards of the vigilance with which Thomas oversees his diet, going so far as to denounce the festival offerings from the Shamsi celebrations as “heathen food” and insisting that Corbin eat “English food. Christian” (*ibid* 44).<sup>7</sup> More English in his habits

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<sup>7</sup> However, what Thomas actually produces is a “curried shepherd’s pie and a kedgeree he calls trifle” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 45), ironically reflecting a hybrid (if

than the Englishman Corbin, he is described visiting the Mission station regularly on Sundays, “stuffed into a black suit and wearing a black hat on top of his glistening hair” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 45). In spite of being described by Corbin as a somewhat comical and ridiculous character,<sup>8</sup> Thomas nevertheless poses a very subversive kind of threat to colonial authority through his aping of British manners. Bhabha’s theory moves from a statement of how mimicry maintains the gap between colonised and coloniser by being “the same, but not quite” (86), to “the same, but not white”. The first assumes that there may yet remain a difference between colonised and coloniser, however small, which is stabilised by the essentialising of racial traits. This maintains their respective positions within the hierarchical binary of race and culture. Yet, in the shift from ‘quite to ‘white’, Bhabha dangerously narrows this gap, revealing that, through the transmission of English language and culture to the colonised, the only perceptible difference left is that of skin colour and *nothing else*. Further, although Thomas is, for all his delusions, an incomplete or imperfect replica of the British citizen, his hybrid ‘English’ culinary concoctions only serve to mirror and underscore Corbin’s own hybrid tastes, be they a gastronomic preference for a “cup of sweet black tea with ginger” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 36) or (as implied in his relationship with Mariamu) a sexual inclination towards something other than a “girl . . . from England” (*ibid* 65).

More sinisterly, Thomas’s actions and motivations also reflect and reveal the exploitative practices of colonialism, exposing the doubleness of colonial discourse,

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unfortunate) combination of cultural culinary influences, instead of the truly ‘English’ dishes that Thomas believes they represent.

<sup>8</sup> Corbin complains that Thomas “has the irritating habit of equating his status with mine” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 23). Perhaps this is why he feels an affinity with the Wataita handlers, who “have fun at [Thomas’s] expense” (*ibid*), for the Englishman wishes to deflect the threat that Thomas’s mimicry poses to his own sense of identity.

which claims to help with one hand while harming with the other. This is evinced when he is discovered “extorting favours from the businessmen using threats of influencing the ADC against them” (*ibid* 51). Further on in the novel, Thomas is shown, once again, to leverage colonial ideology for his personal gain when Mrs Bailey complains of how “that limb of Satan had seduced a girl convert, with the argument that only those women who had real intercourse with a real Christian man would be saved” (*ibid* 86). Driving home the multiple and menacing effects of Thomas’s mimicry, the novel shows us how Thomas’s behaviour uncannily refracts the uses and abuses of colonial authority, for the chaos and ruffled feathers left in his wake uneasily mirror the furore that erupts in the following pages, when Corbin, the white administrator, is accused of having violated Mariamu (*ibid* 88).

Fumfrutti, a “gold-bearded albino . . . who appeared always in the same . . . red shirt, yellow bandanna, and a wide-brimmed hat, as if to mimic an American hunter” (*ibid* 55), is another mimic in the novel. Commenting how skin pigmentation is often read as a powerful marker of one’s racial background, Livingstone observes how “there is, as biologists have regularly observed, as much variation within each side of this culturally charged contrast as between them” (257), and Fumfrutti is a character who rejects and problematizes the construction and application of category of race, compounding the issues faced by the categorisation and hierarchisation of race in colonial discourse. The novel confronts the reader with the long histories of migration and mixing, and the hybrid offspring who result from these interactions, in order to question the validity of the taxonomy of race. A profusion of characters of indeterminate origin populate the text, ranging from Maynard’s servant girl, “a half-caste of partly Arab or Indian blood, partly



African” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 19), to Mariamu, whose “features were markedly distinct . . . so that she seemed an outsider of sorts” (*ibid* 43). Young writes that “[t]he idea of race . . . shows itself to be profoundly dialectical: it only works when defined against potential intermixture, which also threatens to undo its calculations altogether” (*Colonial Desire* 19). Put differently, race invites rigid policing in an attempt to contain it, even as it eludes and disrupts the boundaries established by an ostensibly rational and empirical science of genealogy. The destabilisation of the boundaries of race has far-reaching consequences, for, as Stoler has pointed out in her article on métissage in the French colonies, the concept of what constituted whiteness or Europeaness was deeply troubled by the existence of mixed offspring. “[M]ixing called into question the very criteria by which Europeaness could be identified, citizenship should be accorded, and nationality assigned” (Stoler 199), and the figure of the hybrid threatens the clean-cut distinctions separating coloniser from colonised. Aku, or Ali as he later comes to be known, undermines the biological categories of race, not only due to the ambiguity of his features, which comprise of “grey-eye[s] . . . fair skin, pointed chin, high cheekbones” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 188), but also due to the unresolved puzzle of his parentage. While the suggestion remains within the novel that he may be Corbin’s son, various other, entirely plausible possibilities present themselves within the text (e.g. the son of Rashid the coolie, Pipa, or even a sheik), testifying to the difficulty—indeed, the impossibility—of verifying racial descent via an inspection of physical attributes.

Emphasising the return of “the displacing gaze of the disciplined” (Bhabha 156) the text’s description of “the urbanity, the polish, the acquired Englishness of the Indian—how much did they mock him, the real Englishman” (Vassanji, *The Book of*

*Secrets* 328), simultaneously alienates a discourse that ascribes attributes to race, even as it signals to the reader how culture itself can be separated from race. The manner in which the movements of the colonised circumvent the fixity of boundaries and control is thematically echoed in the novel's example of how people "pay not duties but bribes at the border, freely exchanging and carrying forbidden currency" (*ibid* 174). Not only does the hybrid threaten the boundaries that hold imperial discourse in place, they also constitute a movement, a link—the threshold that lies between an archaic past and a modern present, between loyalties, between identities, between East and West. For not only does travel destabilise, it also serves a libratory function. Fernandes tells us that "[w]e Goanese are a travelling people. There have been many Goans . . . in African from earlier times" (*ibid* 238), suggesting how identity, like people, travels. Fernandes and his colleagues, who cross the equator aboard the *SS Amra*, visit the "third-class deck . . . a floating Indian slum" before joining "the upper decks at the ball. None of us had qualms about taking drinks, and all of us took turns at dancing with an elderly returning headmistress of a girls' school" (*ibid* 239). Exhibiting the liberating potential of living on the border, in occupying a liminal zone, Fernandes crosses easily back and forth between the boundaries of race, class and culture.

The act of border-crossing is not limited only to geographical movements; crossings can also be of a personal nature. Friedman points out that "[borders] promise safety, security, a sense of being at home; they also enforce exclusions, the state of being alien, foreign, and homeless. . . They materialize the law, policing separations" ("Migrations, Diasporas and Borders" 273). "Parviz's exposure and suicide" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 261) foregrounds the fact that to belong to a community is not an

unconditional fact: one has to subscribe to the values of the community before it will offer its support and protection. In seeking to draw close their borders and enforce their values, communities can also oppress, demonstrated by the assault and harassment of Parviz's expatriate lover, Patani, by Shamsi youths. Thus Rita and Ali escape to London, that "haven for illicit, unapproved-of relationships" (*ibid* 261) so that they might be together. And even though the Shamsis have settled in London as well, "[t]he community in London soon forgot the scandal of our arrival and we began to lead normal lives" (*ibid* 283), something that would never have been permitted back in their hometown of Dar. Far from being the only couple to flee their homes, seeking to live as they wish, "[t]here were other girls like me, in London. One had run away to marry a Hindu from South Africa ... Another girl, from Kariakoo, ran away with a boy from the Jafferi sect—a crime much worse than mine" (*ibid* 283). Notably, the novel hints at how the Shamsis themselves had sought a fresh beginning in Africa, away from various restrictions and obstacles in the motherland, "the troubles in India from which [the] community was running" (*ibid* 49-50). The novel suggests that there is freedom to be found in the transposition of old selves into a foreign context, in moving away from one's home or homeland. Gregory is an example of an individual who leaves the place in which he has grown up in order to break away from the ties and expectations that bind him. Similarly, Fernandes exults in his "freedom from an old country with ancient ways, from the tentacles of clinging families with numerous wants and myriad conventions; freedom even from ourselves grounded in those ancient ways" (*ibid* 239).

### 3. Narratives and Containment

#### 3.1 Historicism: Containment and Cracks

*The Book of Secrets* compels the reader to consider how narratives necessarily shape the ways in which we relate to the world, other people, and ourselves. Fernandes muses on the strange way “names, nicknames, cast a spell over their bearers, moving them to immutable fates, combined destinies” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 248); by emphasising that names, and consequently the act of naming, produce us, Vassanji shows how the consolidation of identity through narrative-as-discourse—which, according to Ashcroft, is “a system within which, and by which, subjectivity is constructed” (*On Post-Colonial Futures* 103). If subjectivity cannot exist prior to or outside of the ideological structures in which we are interpellated, it follows that the knowledges which create us also necessarily confine us. The novel tells us that the “book of our secrets” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 2) is full of captured souls in order to point out the ways in which narratives bind and frame our experiences. Not even the mzungu, the white-man administrator who owns the book, is exempt from its power; initially described as a quiescent object, the book gradually develops a life of its own after “it left [the mzungu’s] side, taking part of him with it” (*ibid*). In an uncanny reversion of roles, the book becomes an entity unto itself; now possessed of an autonomous will, it proceeds to ingest its author, trapping a part of him within its pages before going on in search of new authors, who will write in the book and who will, in turn, eventually come to be captured within it. Through his motif of the devouring book (reflected in this fictional book of secrets, lodged within *The Book of Secrets*, the physical novel that we hold in our hands),

Vassanji evokes a keen awareness of the impossibility of extricating ourselves from the narratives in which we are enclosed, and through which we perceive and make sense of the world around us.

The novel opens with a poem that invites the reader to consider how the “father’s clay”, a formless and malleable substance, becomes pressed into the service of various potters, each of whom have a specific vision of the pot—the vessel—that they wish to produce. That the clay should appear in “every potter’s hands” is suggestive of how the clay, vulnerable to being bent and moulded according to the motives of others, is constantly yoked to the interests of those who shape it. Yet, the proliferation of potters and eventual pots also serve to emphasise how none of the rigid vessels created can ever approach the endless possibilities that inhere within the malleability of clay, whose form is never determined, always unsettled, and continually in a state of flux. By drawing our attention to how pots, in hardening and setting, lose the flexible potentiality of the original clay, the novel undermines the fixity of historical interpretations claiming to be official, universal, or definitive. It is no coincidence that the text should refer to the book of secrets as a “bottle book” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 2). Vassanji conjures the image of the bottle book in order to demonstrate how historical narratives, as vessels or repositories seeking to arrange and hence control the representation of reality, are ultimately and necessarily reductive systems that fail to encompass the entirety of “the impossible real” (Kristeva 11). Put differently, what Kristeva defines as the impossible real resides beyond the margins of knowledge: not because it is unknowable *per se*, but, more accurately, because its meaning cannot be reduced to the logic by which our frameworks of understanding operate. Vassanji introduces an irreconcilable tension into

the process of the generation of knowledge, on the one hand signalling to the reader the artifice necessary for meaning to exist, while on the other demonstrating to us the epistemological limitations of such a project.

The novel tells us that Pipa's "given name was Nurmohamed—Pipa was the nickname given to the family by the neighbourhood . . . meaning 'barrel'" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 127-9). That Pipa's name makes reference to a vessel, which "made him feel a lack: of respectability, of a place that was truly home" (*ibid* 127), is significant, for it reiterates the novel's preoccupation with the role that narratives play in our lives: namely, as a container for identity, which shapes our sense of self. Yet, at the same time, this act of containment can be problematic or confining, evinced by how the bottle book of history is filled with disembodied voices seeking escape, desiring to wrest back ownership of "our souls, our secrets" (*ibid* 1); within the fixed planes and seemingly impermeable boundaries of each vessel, imprisoned spirits twist and clamour for release, producing a silent (or perhaps silenced) agitation that sends out a tremor, a reverberation, which threatens to crack their container right open. The novel dwells upon how "the narrative web is a thin film constantly threatened with bursting. For, when narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first" (Kristeva 141), evincing the fragile boundaries of knowledge and meaning-making. In spite of its desire to stabilise knowledge, to fix time in place and override reality with representation, historiography is a vessel rife with fractures and gaps into which "forgotten fragment[s]" crowd (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 7). These fragments generate "an epistemological rupture" (Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness* 28) in an

Eurocentric historical record of the world, pointing out its lack even as they subvert its universal status. The uncertainty and instability of historicist narrative is demonstrated in the novel through the example of Alfred Corbin's lost diary, which has been unearthed from the backroom of an old convenience store. Not only is it a secret or unknown fragment of Africa's colonial past, Corbin's diary is, at the same time, a book of secrets never told, ultimately withholding more than it illuminates. Vassanji problematizes a sense of history that conceives of itself as whole or complete, for the diary's form is itself fragmentary, rendered partial and incomplete; "several pages were torn off, many were stained" through a combination of human vandalism and the vicissitudes of time (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 6). The reliability of the diary as a testament to the past is further compromised when we learn that, despite being a personal diary containing notes that are "scrawled, cryptic", it also contains "neater long journal entries written in a sloping hand" that share "[Corbin's] observations with correspondents" (*ibid* 7). The juxtaposition of private and public entries reveals Corbin's awareness of the existence of other potential readers; suggestive of the degree of self-editing at work in what Corbin chooses to record, the novel employs the example of the personal diary to remind the reader of the degree of partiality at work in any narrative. As a result, the narrative created within Corbin's diary is full of silences, and the gaps in the public record are only hinted at by Corbin's ambiguous relationship with Mariamu, not to mention his subsequent interest in Mariamu's son, Aku.

By directing the reader's focus to the very textuality of history and the act of its writing, Vassanji shows how the limitations of historiographic narrative are three-fold. The first is seen within the novel to reside in the unstable coordinates of language itself.

Vassanji draws our attention to alternative modes of describing and knowing the world through his repeated references to language and translation, from the “dugout boats, called ‘ngalawas’” to the “white Swahili cotton smock . . . called ‘kanzu’” (*ibid* 13). By showing the reader how reality arrives to us refracted, rather than reflected, through language, differently inflected each time it undergoes translation, Vassanji evinces the limitations inherent in grounding an understanding of the world through words and description. Discussing the external challenges posed to historicism, Southgate comments that “our words have . . . no essential referents or external objects to which they correspond. So that our language, rather than reflecting ‘reality’, actually comes to define that reality” (103). If language does not directly transmit reality so much as it is a framework of meaning and references imposed upon reality and which thus restricts it, descriptions of reality through language are necessarily merely representative, simultaneously detached or tenuously moored to that reality, even as it insufficiently encompasses all that is real. It then follows that a historical knowledge of the world that is built up through language and invested with meaning through narrative is subjected to the same constraints. This is why, when Fernandes attempts to conjure the figure of Corbin by creating an image of him through the representative medium of writing, his efforts to narrativise the past ultimately end up emphasising the fictionality of his account. Fernandes tells us that “[t]his is how I have come to picture him: seventy-five years ago, in 1913, the only white man in an African village”; he describes the “rough, crooked wooden table in his rough wooden house”, the pressure lamp that hangs above him from a beam, the glass he’s sipping from, and the pen he writes with (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 7). Yet, even as Fernandes seeks to impress the reality of Corbin’s past



existence upon the reader, the vivid descriptiveness of his writing only serves to draw attention to its very fictionality. The interweaving of extracts drawn directly from Corbin's journal entries (which lay out Corbin's opinions and observations from a first-person perspective), with Fernandes's own interpretation of events wherein he functions as the narrator and represents Corbin to the reader, alert us to the distance that lies between the sketch of a man produced in writing on a page, and the living reality of the person himself. Fernandes himself admits to the reader that it is "the story of the book" (*ibid* 6) that he seeks to tell—in other words, an endeavour that begins to seem more literary more than it is an accurate rendition of the past.

Subversively, the novel shows how, even as Fernandes attempts to narrativise his interpretation of Corbin's history, he is drawn into the story that he creates, "[b]y this writing [which Corbin] begins to weave the thread that will connect to me" (*ibid* 7), rendering the boundaries that divide reality from the act of its writing porous. Vassanji plays up the fictionality of history against the narrativity of literature in order to activate the reader's awareness of the similarity between the two, the dependence upon language and narrative that both forms share: one which interprets in an attempt to fix within knowledge, to solidify as truth, the other which interprets, and invites interpretation in turn. For instance, Corbin's official memoirs, *Heart and Soul*, present only one face of the character—that of Corbin the colonial administrator. The myriad perspectives from both past and present that are conjured by Vassanji's novel, however, provide the reader with a view (by no means comprehensive) that is far more complex and multi-faceted: Corbin is depicted as boyish, even gullible, as he is retrospectively constructed in Fernandes's narrative (*ibid* 14); his diary entries reveal how he is alternately authoritative

and then conciliatory in his interactions with the Kikono Shamsis (*ibid* 72); he appears warm, yet very much the disdainful British colonial, in his letters to Gregory (*ibid* 323). It is by the openness and open-endedness of its form that the novel, instead of focussing on closure, takes us beyond monolithic frameworks of knowledge to emphasise the plurality and mutability of identity itself, which can accommodate multiple, even contradictory meanings. In contrast to the rigidity of historicist narratives, which insist upon the factuality and accuracy of their representations, the flexible nature of fiction, represented by the riddles told by Fumfratti by the campfire, not only “keeps the men’s minds off their loads, their pangs of hunger, and the intense heat”; the albino storyteller’s long stories, which “continue from the previous night and (I believe) change plots and characters” (*ibid* 58) are richly suggestive of the shifting, mutable nature of what of real. Vassanji himself underscores the very fictionality of his novel through his hybrid reimaginings of the past (which follow the developments of an imaginary Shamsi community in Africa) in order to destabilise the fixed boundaries of discourse.

The second limitation of historiography lies in the manner in which it constructs a version of the past by referencing the historical archive. By highlighting the scattered, incomplete and only partially-joined nature of historical narrative, the novel points to the many gaps and holes that exist even within what claims to be a “well-documented history” (*ibid* 7). As White explains, “[a] historical narrative is . . . a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for explanation” (“Interpretation in History” 281). Fernandes, in researching the history of Corbin’s diary, can only operate via surmise, evincing the degree of guesswork involved

in the creation of a historicist account. Even what has been written is not necessarily reliable—for their authors, being unwilling to bare their innermost thoughts, often actively work to conceal their motivations and actions. Returning to the example of Corbin’s autobiography, the novel reveals to the reader that *Heart and Soul* is written primarily in the hopes of securing a peerage. Having been “passed over” for knighthood, it is a “bitter blow” that jolts Corbin into working on his memoirs (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 327). In other words, Corbin’s official memoirs are compiled for institutional purposes, written in the hopes of receiving public recognition or rewards. Fernandes’s comment that the end product is less than engaging, “not to say soulless” (*ibid* 91), suggests that the autobiography does not illuminate Corbin’s history so much as it seeks to hide it, reproducing in its place an image of the past that will align with the requirements of the dominant paradigm. Hence, the self-editing that inevitably occurs in the process of writing, necessary for the narration of an officially-sanctioned version of events, renders the entire project disingenuous, perhaps even untruthful. The novel makes this evident when Corbin’s wife, Anne, mentions that she and Corbin had encountered an “Ali Akber Ali” at a “colonial ‘do’ in London” (*ibid* 327). Corbin’s enduring interest in Ali, evinced when he questions Khanoum about Ali’s parentage, is made clear once more when he asks Ali where he was born, suggesting rather strongly that Corbin does indeed suspect Ali of being his child, which in turn can only lead the reader to conclude that Corbin did in fact have sexual relations with Mariamu—a component of the past that is almost certainly never revealed within the pages of *Heart and Soul*. The truth of the matter remains hidden, tucked away between the lines of personal missives not found in the historical archive, such as in the case of Anne’s letter to Gregory, wherein her

markedly ambivalent attitude towards Ali, and her declining to accompany Corbin to his subsequent meetings with Ali, suggest a knowledge of the past that has been left unsaid.

Lastly, the problems inherent in a historicist account of the past are evinced by the elision of the historian's situatedness in space and time. Empiricism, which bases itself on observation and objectivity, in fact turns on the arbitrary hierarchisation of Time and culture, implicitly taking European civilisation to be the pinnacle of human achievement by placing "all living societies . . . on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream. Civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization . . . are all terms whose conceptual content derives, in ways that can be specified, from evolutionary Time" (Fabian 17). The novel disrupts a linear treatment of time through its narrative structure. Not only does it alternate between different narrators (from Fernandes, whose perspective structures the overall text, to Corbin, the author of his journal, to a number of different letter-writers, such as Fernandes's student, or Anne, Corbin's wife), and refract the same moment through the eyes of its various characters, such as in the instance of Mariamu and Pipa's wedding night, which is related from Corbin's point of view in one chapter, and then re-framed in terms of Pipa's experiences in the next, the narrative itself is one that moves back and forth in time. Scenes from a distant colonial past, represented in Fernandes's story about the inhabitants of Kikono, transition abruptly into the present as Fernandes relates to us his experiences in his chapters on "Miscellany" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 91, 173, 227, 329), before dipping back into events of the past. Through a series of hithers and thithers (Bhabha 1-2), the novel problematizes a straightforward conception of temporality by which the universal character of European modernity is enthroned. The novel shows how the

present in fact inheres in the past, which constantly threatens to burst into the current moment. Vassanji's writing deftly oscillates between different points along a temporal sequence, resulting in multiple narrative strands that can either converge or contradict, depicting a plurally-articulated present that rests uneasily above a fractured and uneven, perhaps even irreconcilable, past. Fabian has observed that, by locating the observer in a Time other than that of the 'past', temporal distancing creates "the objects or referents of . . . discourse" (30); and when Fernandes initiates his investigation of Corbin's diary, he assumes that history merely waits to be discovered, for someone to revive the spirit of the past and tell "its story" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 8). Yet his very choice of words betray something of the agenda behind his project, of a personal desire that gives the lie to the figure of the distanced and objective historian. For Fernandes's motivations, far from being an academic wish to retrieve the past, actually stems from a nostalgic desire to "defy the blistering shimmering dusty bustle of city life outside which makes transients of us all" (*ibid*), which in turn is joined to Fernandes's status as an immigrant, cut off from friends and family in his retirement.

In the novel's opening chapter, Vassanji describes the *mzungu*, who "steals our souls and locks them away . . . See how he keeps his eyes skinned" (*ibid* 1) in order to centre the reader's attention upon the invisible narrator. Stuart Hall suggests that "[t]he displacement of the 'centred' discourses of the West entails putting in question its universalist character and its transcendental claims to speak for everyone, while being itself everywhere and nowhere" ("New Ethnicities" 201), and the impossibility of the distanced and objective eye/I is exposed by Vassanji as he focuses upon the figure of the writer, who seeks to narrate history even as he conceals his position as a narrator, thus

effectively disguising his presence within the text (as well as his relation to it). The novel describes writing as an act of theft as well as imprisonment, and attributes it specifically to the *mzungu*, the white coloniser. Vassanji further seeks to locate the act of writing by gendering it, by comparing the *mzungu*'s passion for writing in his book to his passion for a woman (which, given Fernandes's uncertain sexuality, places an emphasis upon the heteronormative structures of knowledge that shape our understanding, to say nothing of Fernandes's own lack of self-awareness). Not only does Vassanji's metafictional novel make a point of alerting the reader to the constructedness of narrative, it exposes the position of the writer, the historian, who, far from the Enlightenment ideal of the distanced and objective eye (or 'I'), is motivated by personal agendas either acknowledged or unacknowledged. Rather than being emotionally distanced from the text, thus outside it, the writer locates her or himself within the text itself, and is embroiled within its pathways of reasoning, and its presentations of reality and truth. Even leaving aside Fernandes's deeply personal motives, it quickly becomes evident that he imports his perceptions, beliefs and dislikes into his story, demonstrated in his less than balanced depiction of various characters, particularly of Ali, who he describes as juvenile and arrogant,<sup>1</sup> and whom he resents for winning Rita's love. Mondal states that "[d]econstructing the concept of the 'field' . . . disrupts the allochronic . . . logic of anthropology, which needs discrete and 'closed' cultures so as to organise them hierarchically in relation to the 'cosmopolitan' West" (79). I wish to suggest that the idea of a 'field' to be arbitrarily cordoned off can be usefully applied when investigating how

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<sup>1</sup> Fernandes describes Ali's wooing of Rita as taking "[a] somewhat juvenile tack for a man of his age" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 250), stating that "[i]t was typical of [Ali's] arrogance that he used the most public figure, the town crier, to carry his love notes" (*ibid*).

historical narratives are presented by Vassanji as similarly artificial constructions portraying a totalised reality, which emanates from the West—put differently, it is a view of the past that is observed from a single perspective, and which refuses to acknowledge that events are in fact differently perceived and multiply inflected, and that their significance can change depending on the location from which they are experienced. To study history we assume it is ‘complete’—in short, a ‘closed book’. Vassanji subverts the notion that the past can be neatly partitioned from the present and made an object of study. Fernandes admits to the “hidden longings of my past” which his project dredges up and forces him to confront, “exposed to my own inquiry, also captive to the book”, evincing the ways in which his own life is ineluctably joined to the events of a supposedly distant past, hence rendering him incapable of locating a vantage point that lies outside of it (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 8).

### 3.2. Colonialism: Borders and Fixing

Aku’s school readers exemplify how the words and the languages out of which these narratives are shaped are by no means ideologically neutral, but instead come invested with particular points of view, and function to incorporate the colonial subject within imperial discourse.<sup>2</sup> Featuring sentences and imagery that assume the context of England, evinced by sentences describing how “the farmer went trotting upon his grey mare”, Aku’s readers depict a reality and a set of corresponding beliefs that, placed within a colonial context, stands out jarringly as an attempt to consolidate power through

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<sup>2</sup> For, as suggested by Tiffin, Lawson and Lawson, “[c]olonialism (like its counterpart, racism), then, is an operation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation” (Describing Empire, Post-Colonialism and Intertextuality 3).

education (*ibid* 212).<sup>3</sup> Commenting on the role education played in the colonies, Viswanathan points out how knowledge, far from being objective, instead creates a certain perspective on reality; “English literary education . . . enable[d] the humanistic ideals of enlightenment to coexist with and indeed even support education for social and political control” (3). Viswanathan further argues that “English literature appeared as a subject in the curriculum of the colonies long before it was institutionalized in the home country” (3). This compellingly suggests that the emergence of the discipline of English literature was intimately tied with the need to exalt English culture in the colonies, a process that simultaneously held up British culture as exemplary (in order to justify why its process of civilisation should be adopted by ‘backward’ cultures), even as it disseminated these values and ideologies through the institution of a formal education syllabus, thus consolidating Empire’s hegemonic control over its colonies. In the same vein, the novel conveys how colonial discourse fundamentally informs the colonial subject’s sense of self, belonging, and home through Fernandes, who says that “[t]o see history take substance before one’s own eyes (I was quite taken by monuments) is deeply impressive; to know things, recognize them upon first sight, as objects familiar and near” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 270). Evinced the effectiveness of an ideology that exalts the metropolitan centre of Empire, Fernandes is as intimately familiar with the landmarks of the metropole as any citizen who lives there, despite never having personally beheld them before. It is no coincidence, then, that Fernandes’s speciality should be the teaching of history (*ibid* 240). He laments the limited scope of the syllabus that he is assigned, which fails to even briefly point out recent watershed events in world history—the “two

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<sup>3</sup> “Rule Britannia. It is the duty of all subjects to be loyal to their king” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 212).



world wars, Hiroshima, Yalta, the independence of India” (*ibid*). He is instead required to teach “Mughal history ... and above all English history with the Tudors and the Stuarts” (*ibid*)—a syllabus that focuses on roots without speaking of how these disparate histories have long since intermingled and joined within the continent of Africa.

In the town of Mombasa, Corbin is handed a guidebook, which informs him that the “old Portugese fort is a must. The old name of Mombasa was Mvita, for war . . . . Then the ancient mosque, the northern harbour where the dhows anchor, the water gate. And, no visitor to Mombasa misses the boat ride around the island” (*ibid* 16). The tram “running on rails”, which allows for sight-seeing around the island, is literally incapable of deviating from the guide book’s list of notable sites (*ibid*). While neatly summarizing the city’s history and sights deemed worth seeing, this begs the question of exactly which sights/sites are considered important, which are not, why this is the case, and to whom are these value judgments relevant. The novel shows us how the legitimacy of colonialism is predicated upon control of the landscape and its inhabitants, which is achieved through the physical partitioning of the land itself, but also, more importantly, through attempts to stabilise the re-presentation of the African continent within discourse. However, far from stabilising a unitary reality, the narratives through which a factual knowledge of the world is established is depicted within the novel as fragile, its boundaries porous and vulnerable to change. The link between Enlightenment claims of universality and the world-spanning ambitions of Empire are explained by McClintock as a “[p]lanetary consciousness . . . drawing the whole world into a single “science of order” . . . hosts of explorers, botanists, natural historians and geographers set out with the vocation of ordering the world’s forms into a global science of the surface and an optics of truth”

(34). In his writing, Vassanji sets out to highlight the ways in which colonial power and colonial rule were validated through a belief in the optics of truth, which, far from being neutral or factual, in fact masked assumptions about the nature of observation and who was qualified to do so. Thus McClintock asserts that “[t]he global science of the surface was a *conversion* project, dedicated to transforming the earth into a single economic currency, a single pedigree of history and a universal standard of cultural value—set and managed by Europe” (34). Vassanji draws the reader’s attention to the obliterating and totalising glare emitted by the torch of reason through his reference to the “silver trophies . . . so blinding in the evening light” (*The Book of Secrets* 194). Capable of blinding the viewer to everything but the light they reflect, the trophies, which grade according to perceived rank or accomplishment, alert us to the hierarchising impulse behind claims towards universality. Likewise, the “powerful pressure lamp, by whose bright light” the Fisi and his lieutenants work, bears out this observation on the conflation of light, logic and linearity within colonial discourse (*ibid* 167).

The novel, however, then goes on to demonstrate the failure of enlightenment assumptions through its destabilisation of the universality of knowledge, which insists upon the absolutism of facts. What I mean to say is that an empirical treatment of the world is based on the assumption that facts are self-explanatory; that being is essential, rather than relative; that meaning is fixed, rather than fluid. The text shows us “photographs, newspaper cuttings, scraps of paper with writing, maps, sketches” (*ibid* 154), which arrive from various sources and bear different methods of information transmission, from notes in “Punjabi and . . . English”, to drawings explained through “crude symbols and texts” (*ibid* 167). These “scraps of paper bearing messages” are

cryptic and difficult to interpret, suggesting how information without a context can signify very little. It is only after Maynard pieces together these scraps of intelligence by structuring them within a narrative that he obtains an understanding of the German troop movements. By showing how texts are meaningless without context, and how 'facts' cannot communicate essential or self-evident meanings, the novel makes the point that a seemingly objective or logical mode of understanding the world nevertheless relies fundamentally upon the subjective activity of interpretation, and its immobilisation of information within a narrative structure. This is why "[e]very intercepted message collected in his book had a number, a place" (*ibid* 169), indicating the manner in which facts have to be locked together into a static sequence in order to create a version of events out of a multitude of possible accounts.

The novel alerts us to how the colonised are constructed within discourse as requiring the civilising benefits of European culture to progress beyond primitivity and into the a modern temporality marked by history and progress. The production of the colonised is not a neutral act, but rather one of containment, which subjects the colonised and the colonisers to strict definitions in order to preserve the hierarchy between them. Commenting on the colonial enterprise, Comaroff states:

[T]he civilizing colonialism . . . sought to 'cultivate' the African 'desert' and its inhabitants by planting the seeds of bourgeois individualism and the nuclear family, of private property and commerce, of rational minds and healthily clad bodies, of the practical arts of refined living and devotion to God . . . [to] reduce the landscape from a chaotic mass of crude, dirty huts to an orderly array of square, neatly bounded residences (with rooms and doors, windows and furniture,

fields and fences), enclosure being both a condition of private property and civilized individualism and an aesthetic expression of the beauty of refinement (181-2).

Yet, the narrative shows how the colonised, such as the Shamsis of the novel, belong to diasporic and “well-organized” communities, and news of Jamali the mukhi’s “single-family settlement spread to Mombasa and beyond. . . . A few months later two men arrived from India, and later their families” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 27). Testifying to other civilisations, familial networks, social organisations, knowledges and faiths, the novel tells the reader that, “[w]here there are two Shamsis, as the adage says, let one be the headman, father and priest . . . and let the other form the congregation. That is, let them without further ado start a mosque” (*ibid* 27). Despite Corbin’s delusions of how the vitality and life “springing up” (*ibid* 33) around the continent are attributable solely to the civilising influences of Empire, Vassanji points out that it was the Shamsi community which, having “[set] themselves up, loyal British subjects—and vociferously so—with visions of growth and prosperity for the town . . . applied to the government for official township status” (*ibid* 28). The authority of Eurocentric knowledge, which rests upon the construction of “the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (Bhabha 101), becomes destabilised through the novel’s presentations of an always-already hybrid and vibrant Africa, criss-crossed by long histories of migration that pre-date even the intrusion of colonial authority in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, evinced by the existence of African tribes such as the Swahili, the Wataita and the Masai, and the histories of past kingdoms, hinted at by Thomas’s story of “how a

woman from his people was once Queen of Mombasa . . . during Portugese times” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 23).

The act of charting the world, the very notion of discovery, is one that hinges upon the assumption of a hierarchy. The degradation of non-European ways of perceiving the world, of other knowledges, serves to relegate them as mere “habit” or “superstition” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 39), which in turn permits the presence of the colonised to be excised from colonial discourse. Anne’s garden, which Aku tends to in his childhood, is described as possessing a “design in [its] timing and arrangement” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 193). The “roses and sunflowers” (*ibid* 193) blooming in the garden—flowers not native to Africa—reflect the literal transposition of an European reality, and European ideas of beauty and order, over the local landscape. Rather than being purely aesthetic, the garden’s arrangement draws attention to colonialism’s attempts to control and shape the continent. The suggestive wording of the same paragraph, wherein Aku “and the woman had killed a snake together” (*ibid*), coupled with Miss Elliot’s comment on how much Africa seemed like “an Eden”, for “[s]urely Adam must have walked here in these very plains and hills, in this region of the earth” (Vassanji 39), make references to the Genesis story wherein man is created from clay. This in turn suggests how the “father’s clay”, referred to in to epigraph of *The Book of Secrets*, is shaped by “the ideologies of missionaries and evangelists working in Africa in the colonial period” (Gikandi, “African Literature and the Colonial Factor” 389), wherein “the establishment of Christian missions was so closely associated with colonial conquest and rule that it was often difficult to differentiate the two processes” (*ibid* 387). Evinced the desire of colonial missionaries to discover an unfallen and pre-lapsarian world in the continent of

Africa, an Eden empty of the sins and spiritual malaise plaguing the metropolises of Empire, the novel activates the reader's awareness of how even the "supposed religious truths of Christianity" (Southgate 108) are implicated in the project of colonial control, which seeks to plant European gardens, material as well as spiritual, all over Africa, but which also builds an imperial paradise of wealth and power in the metropolis through its domination over and exploitation of its colonies. During his time in the "European life of Nairobi" (Vassanji 61), Corbin is told that "with persistence it could all be made real, like America. . . . Ten years ago this was all bush, dry grass. The Masai and Kikuyu walked around half-naked then" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 63), showing how the reality experienced by the local inhabitants of Africa has to be disavowed and classified as unreal before colonial rule can be justified, for "[o]nly empty spaces can be settled, so the space had to be made empty by ignoring or dehumanizing the inhabitants" (Tiffin, Lawson and Lawson, 5).

The emblem of the lion, mounted on the wall, is employed by Vassanji less as a metaphor for Africa than as a metaphor for the process and effects of the control that colonial powers sought to exert over Africa and its inhabitants, capturing vividly the violent self-interest of this ostensibly benevolent colonial rule. Mounted on the club's walls, the lion head is fixed in place and captured in its moment of death, arranged in a grotesque rictus, "its mouth stretched open" by a taxidermist (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 17). Keeping in mind the many states in which the lion can exist—sleeping, playing, resting, eating, mating, hunting, fighting—all the viewer is presented with is one facet of the lion's story, one telling of its life, namely that it "had carried off twenty-seven victims" (*ibid*). Prominently displayed, the very sight of the lion head "could make

your stomach turn, your hair rise” (*ibid*). And yet, for all its fearsomeness, the lion is described by Corbin as a “vanquished terror”, representing a threat to the sanctity of the imperial body that has been soundly defeated and put in its place (*ibid* 18). Young comments on the “implicit violence of ontology itself, in which the same constitutes itself through a form of negativity in relation to the other, producing all knowledge by appropriating and subsuming the other within itself” (*White Mythologies* 45). Drawing upon the example of the vanquished lion, the novel points out how, in an echo of Conrad, the savagery that Maynard attributes to the country, which “makes a savage out of you” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 21), is not the result of some inherent quality of Africa, but in fact born of a desperate desire to fix in place an understanding of the world—put differently, to rearrange reality by force, if necessary, in order to assert the validity of one’s values. This is reflected in how, upon arriving at Kikono, Corbin learns of an administrator who “had hanged eight mothers in a row for infanticide” (*ibid* 53), a punishment that not only well exceeds the severity of the original transgression, but which also fails to take into account the circumstances that resulted in their occurrence. Shortly after, Corbin himself, faced with the dilemma of how to resolve the case of Mariamu, becomes “frustrated and helpless, uncertain”, and experiences “[a] dark thought flutter[ing] into his mind, which he could not entertain, articulate” (*ibid* 72). Emerging as “*Furore africanus* . . . a welling up of uncontrollable anger” (*ibid* 53), the novel reveals that it is this very sense of helplessness, of the loss of control, that causes colonial administrators to make horrifically harsh judgments in an attempt to assert the realness of their values. Even as Vassanji draws our attention to the contradiction in the articulation of the civilising mission and its actual manifestations, through the

depravations and depredations of white administrators gone power-mad, he also reveals the limitations of the project of Enlightenment knowledge and rationality, which desires a controllable and containable ‘other’ represented in terms of “an ideal and unchanging abstraction” (Said 74), and yet which falls short of encapsulating a reality far more complex than can be explained by, or stabilised within, colonial discourse. For, as I will proceed to argue in the next chapter, the ‘other’, far from being manageable, is an unruly presence that disturbs and destabilises colonial configurations of power, by its opacity, its mutability, and through counter-narratives that challenge the dominant discourse.

### 3.3. Nation: Belonging and Exclusion

Anderson defines nation as a form of narrative, achieved through "this extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the newspaper-as-fiction" (35). His emphasis on the fictionality of nation, which “seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations" (36), suggests the ways in which the circulation of writing is what allows people to engage with and participate in the collective identity of nationhood. In the novel, newspapers literally enfold and envelop, often being used as some kind of “wrapping paper” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 225), and even Corbin’s diary, as another form of writing, is described as a “slim book that has enmeshed so many lives” (*ibid* 227). However, Gikandi observes in *Maps of Englishness* that “the close connection between the figures of nationness and empire” has been elided in “Anderson’s notion of the nation as an imagined community . . . For if a modern British nation cannot be imagined outside the realm of empire, then



imperialism becomes the *raison d'être* of Britishness itself" (31). The nature of the news that Corbin comes across in the colonial community of Nairobi evince how the fiction of community and belonging, implicit within the concept of an imagined community, in fact constructs itself against depictions of the "unhygienic brown man" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 64). Not only does the discourse of the imagined community take as its assumed audience the European-born colonial (the 'ideal' citizenry of Empire), the constitution of its identity operates upon the marginalisation of the colonised. The novel gives voice to the desire to contest this unevenness of representation through Pipa's tendency to steal diaries—first Bwana Turner's (*ibid* 137), and then Corbin's (*ibid* 147). The act of contestation, however, is often violent, for Pipa is severely disciplined (or nearly disciplined severely) for attempting to steal Bwana Turner's valise, echoing the lament of the captured souls, who tell the reader, "the punishment for stealing such a book is harsh—ai!—we have seen it" (*ibid* 1). The novel illustrates how nations police their boundaries with civil peace-keeping forces in order to compel internal adherence to their "rules and regulations" (*ibid* 133), as well as with an army to maintain their external borders against incursions from other nations (*ibid* 116). The ultimate threat of hurt and death is most compellingly invoked by the violence of the crack of rifles heard by the residents of Kikono (*ibid* 117), emphasising the ways in which the project of the project of boundary drawing is maintained through deep lines that cut (*ibid* 114).

By looking at the ways in which historicism and colonialism have served to contribute to and constitute the "global time line of progress" (Cooppan 60), *The Book of Secrets* begins to question the dominant global narrative in which 'official' identities are, first and foremost, determined by a person's nationality. The novel shows how the

troubling application of national categories in the colonial context split and disrupt established local flows of exchange and community, by conscripting them into a hegemonic and homogeneous world order in which there is little tolerance for the ambiguity of affiliations. The questions raised by the residents at Kikono, asking, “Eti, who is at war with whom? Did we say we were fighting? Have we enemies, jamani? Since when is the Chagga tribe our enemy? And if a Taita lives across the border—eti, where is this border? Is he my enemy bwana?” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 114) demonstrate the ways in which assignations of nationality displace and supercede the familial, communal and racial ties of local populations. The Shamsis serve as an example of a diasporic community that extends across national boundaries, establishing lines of contact through India, Africa, Britain and elsewhere. In describing the jubilee held for the “spiritual leader of the community, Suleiman Pir” (*ibid* 261), the novel demonstrates how the web of community stretches across nations, countries and continents; Shamsis from all over the world gather at Dar to celebrate (*ibid* 261-2), thus problematising the intertwined concepts of nation and identity. The migrations of itinerant individuals also complicate assignations of nationality; Pipa, for instance, moves between Moshi, Dar es Salaam, and Kikono at various points in his life, and incidents such as when “[t]he next day war with Germany ... was confirmed. ... Pipa was an enemy national” (*ibid* 108) strikingly convey the sheer insufficiency of nationality to describe or encapsulate a complex reality in which the fluid and hybrid movements of Indians, Arabs and Africans across the African continent continually transgress the political borders established by the various colonial powers.

The novel seeks to highlight the problems inherent in an “apropriative [imperial] nationalism taking the form of ‘projects of unity on the basis of conquest and economic expediency’” (Parry 10). The contradictory claims made by colonialism—namely, “to bring the land into the twentieth century” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 30-1) in spite of the horrors inflicted by white administrators and landlords upon the colonised (*ibid* 64), the dispossession of their land and the disavowal of their history and humanity demonstrate the gap between the ideal of the nation as protection and the application of nation as exploiter in the colonial context, wherein its assignations of identity offer little to no protection for those it claims to represent. Friedman reminds us that “[t]he imagined community of nation or culture frequently assumes a normative or defining identity that all too easily ignores hierarchical distributions of power within the group” (“Beyond Difference” 277). The novel demonstrates that colonialism assumes the right to assert “authority, ... order” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 21) over the locals despite offering little reward or benefit in return. Pipa, for instance, wonders indignantly, “[w]hy had those sons of dogs jumped on him ... what would those white bwanas gives them” (*ibid* 137). The concept of nation, with its attendant claims to serve on the behalf of the masses, to represent their interests, and to look after their well-being—“to give of our best” (*ibid* 329)—is revealed within the novel to function as those few in power (namely, the European colonisers) working to secure their own interests, rather than those of the majority. Further, this always takes place at the expense of the colonised, who frequently find themselves trapped between the loyalties demanded by nationhood.<sup>4</sup> Thus Pipa, in a

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<sup>4</sup> Pipa, for instance, is made to deliver certain letters from Kikono when he realizes that “Bwana Rudolfu was the German commander of Moshi. Pipa had no choice” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 144); and later, to collect messages “from agents in Moshi or Taveta” for Maynard, a British agent (*ibid* 155).

moment of insight during his interrogation by Maynard, “looked at each of them in wonder. Who were these men? ... Why did they play this game? What gave them the right to choose good and bad for him, right and wrong” (*ibid* 169).

Rita speaks of the way in which narratives of London construct an idealised, larger-than-life image of the place, derived from “Schoolgirl’s Picture Library comics and Enid Blyton and Indian films”, which conjure “visions of Big Ben and the friendly bobby” (*ibid* 283). However, participation in the same fiction of belonging—namely the circulation of movies, newspapers, books and other narratives that form the imagined community, which offer an “intimate knowledge of, and even sense of friendship with, a certain kind of England: a dream-England . . . of tolerance and fair play”, nevertheless fails to live up to the reality, “[b]ecause of course the dream-England is no more than a dream” (Rushdie 18). Gregory sardonically informs Fernandes that “if something were to happen to me and I got kicked out, England, that bitch, would always accept me—but not you, Pius. Wrong colour” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 305). Similarly, upon relating her experiences in London, Rita describes how “[w]e were coloured . . . They treated you like servants, then” (*ibid* 283), evincing how full membership within the nation continues to be hindered by the question of skin colour and race, exemplifying the “state’s strategies of exclusion and discrimination in the midst of its promises of formal equality and procedural democracy” (Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, xxi).

Even an “anti-imperialist” nationalism “oriented towards the task of reclaiming community from the fragmentation and denigration attendant on colonialism” (Parry 10) is faced with its own set of problems. Vassanji draws the reader’s attention to how, post-Independence, nationhood paradoxically results in a less free environment, where

“[I]oyalty . . . had to be loud and unequivocal. Some countries allow dual citizenship, but not the new republics hungry for recognition and greatness, suspicious of new colonialisms, anxious for a clean break from past humiliations” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 305). Ashcroft states that “the first trap of resistance discourse is the reversal, but retention of the binary in a way that transfers power without transforming it” (*On Post-Colonial Futures* 123). Ironically, in seeking to avoid the pitfalls of “new colonialisms”, the hierarchical binaries of ‘self’ and ‘other’ are merely reconstituted, reinvented—in a word, inverted—by the “new ruling class” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 305). The novel attests to how a nativist nationalism excises the contributions of officially designated ‘others’, evinced also in Pipa being told by a black politician that “come independence . . . we’ll send you back where you came from”, a statement that Pipa refutes with his indignant assertion, “I come from Moshi” (*ibid* 276). Another instance of how the rigid boundaries of nation inevitably constitute themselves through exclusion and marginalisation is reflected in the confiscation of property belonging to “mostly Asians” by the government (*ibid* 311). Bhabha points to how “the very idea of a pure, ‘ethnically cleansed’ national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood” (7), suggesting the uncompromising and unsympathetic categories of selfhood that disavow certain aspects of the past in order to delineate a national identity. History is re-written when placed in the hands of the nation’s government and its “government newspaper Mwafrika” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 307), which attempt to dissolve the past, to strike out memory, and replace them with a streamlined and officially sanctioned account of the country’s history. The novel

describes the removal of “the boards containing the list of all the former graduates of Boyschool . . . —in the cause less of egalitarianism than of erasing an irksome past”, demonstrating how the complex and intricate interactions of the past, and the part they played in constituting the present, become subsumed, conscripted into the writing of a national text in which they are considered “irksome” (*ibid*).

Consider the scene where Fernandes describes “[t]he mosque yard” linking “two busy streets with its two entrances. It was always crowded with people: pedestrian traffic pausing to chat; lonely men and women without a relation in the world . . . Seeking refuge and companionship . . . Someone made a loud remark about the Goro—Goan—and I longed to pedal away” (*ibid* 245). Fernandes’s outcast status is evinced by his lament that “I was a complete outsider, without a common caste, religion, mother tongue, place of origin” (*ibid* 244). And yet the mosque yard itself is described as a liminal space that connects two streets, residing between them and allowing passage between zones. Symbolic of the gap between borders, it is portrayed as an area where movements and interactions take place between lonely people and transients: a site that enables connection and the questioning of identity—in short, the opening up of boundaries. The novel demonstrates how diasporic communities such as the Shamsis can evade the regulations and oppressions of nation by facilitating connections and offers of support. Community is depicted by Vassanji as mobile, unconfined by colonial borders or national groupings, and oriented always towards opportunity and the improvement of its members. Pipa is informed of “the great benefits for those living in the towns of Kilimanjaro to co-operate with each other. There were matters of trade, obviously, and employment of new and younger people and . . . marriages and so on. As well,

information could be exchanged regarding the methods of the governments on either side of the border” (*ibid* 141).<sup>5</sup> Marked by a culture of reciprocal exchange, the Shamsi community is shown to look out for the interests of its members, evinced by how, when “the question of the young man’s marriage arose, [it] was quickly taken up by the community” (*ibid* 140), and suggesting in turn the cementing of affiliations through shared values and mutual benefit, for “[m]any a lonely young man had been compelled to change allegiance, many a willing young man duly rewarded with a bride and a business (*ibid* 133).

Fernandes describes “the school that the Precious Jubilee had made possible . . . . A school so beautiful . . . There was nothing like it in the country. Only Nairobi’s exclusive white schools came close” (*ibid* 267). While the implicit bar for quality or success continues to be set by the West, suggested by how “[t]he Shamsis had learned the colonial game well”, the school serves as a testament to what community can achieve, even in the face of apartheid, for “[t]hey played by the rules but they played to win” (*ibid*).<sup>6</sup> And on her experiences in England, Rita speaks of how “[b]ehind many an immigrant success-story there is a guardian angel” (*ibid* 287), demonstrating the ways in

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<sup>5</sup> Not only can individuals within a community offer support to one another through unofficial networks, the strength of community is found in the way it seeks to preserve the mutual interest of its members. In the course of his administration in Kikono, Corbin observes that, “[p]owerless though the individual Indian is beside a European, as a community they have a voice that is heard. In Nairobi, as the Herald regularly reports, they are making a lot of noise; more than three-quarters of the country’s business passes through their hands, in towns just as small as this one” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 49).

<sup>6</sup> Gikandi observes, in *Maps of Englishness*, that “subordination to the master narrative of imperialism and the Enlightenment, are, at the same time, the enabling condition for modern subjectivities not only in Africa but also in England” (20), for the metropole and the (post)colony were and continue to be linked by “the idea of bourgeois civility and identity; it was what marked the colonized as modern subjects who had broken with outmoded or “tribal” traditions . . . we cannot ignore the affinity between colonization and the making of—or desire for—middle-class sensibilities” (32).

which migrant communities band together to provide aid, whereas the official channels of nation serve only to disempower and hinder its 'aliens'. In an exchange between Ali and his benefactor, Mr. Eisen, Ali comes to the realisation that:

“For a loan—but I could go to Lloyd’s Bank.”

“Would they give you it—give it to you... you know what I mean!”

“No.”

“Exactly.” (*ibid*)

Mr Eisen’s business, “Athena Finance Company”, provides loans to other migrants who, due to their marginalised position as racialised ‘others’, are unable to obtain financial assistance through the nation’s banks (*ibid*). The novel evinces the manner in which migrants, in their own community, manage to sidestep the regulations that might otherwise hinder them. Athena Finance Company’s subsequent business deals, wherein a large contract arrived “from some Arab businessmen” to charter a ship, possibly “carrying weapons and European mercenaries” to revolutionaries in Zanzibar, demonstrate the potential of diasporic networks to evade and also destabilise national boundaries (*ibid* 289).



#### 4. Silence and Subalterity

##### 4.1 Silence and Resistance

In a text filled to overflowing with narrators and authors, whose voices and points of view generate a polyphonic excess of nuances and meaning, the character of Mariamu stands out as the exception in her enduring and enigmatic silence. A young woman of the Shamsi community in Kikono, she “lived with her mother and stepfather. She was [Jamali’s] niece, moreover; her mother was his own sister” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 50). It is significant that the character of Mariamu is only ever partially revealed; to the readers, to Corbin, to Pipa, and to her son, Aku, she is a ghostly and subdued presence who is frequently spoken for, and rarely speaking. Corbin’s (and the reader’s) first sight of her are of “fleeting glimpses caught between bush and tree and anthill – a figure draped in white” that quickly “disappeared behind an incline” (*ibid* 28). Likewise, during Pipa and Mariamu’s wedding, the novel describes how, “[t]hroughout the evening, he had caught only glimpses of her ... this gift he had been given” (*ibid* 103). Appearing as though through cracks in a wall, Mariamu shows a different facet of herself each time she appears within the text, and leaves Corbin pondering over how “I do not know what to make of her—the impetuous girl who walked in past my askari and spoke directly to me, then the silent girl who left chapattis for me on Thursdays, the girl humiliated by the maalim’s switch, the proud girl holding her uncovered head high and staring directly at me, and now the quiet and shy housekeeper. Which is the real one” (*ibid* 78-9).

Various described within the novel as “wild” (*ibid* 70), “strange” (*ibid*), and “a mystery” (*ibid* 146), Mariamu, with her “features markedly distinct from the other

women's" (*ibid* 43), is very much a marginal figure in the community in spite of her ostensibly secure position as the mukhi's relative. Vassanji draws the reader's attention to Mariamu's inability to represent herself through descriptions of how, in the course of her wedding celebrations, the "occasional thin clink of the bangles on her arms" were "the only sound emanating from her" (*ibid* 104). Boyarin and Boyarin state that "identity is maintained through exclusion and oppression of internal others (especially women) and external others" (qtd. in Friedman, "Migrations, Diasporas and Borders" 271); by drawing the reader's attention to how the interests of colonial racism and a native patriarchy converge upon the bodies of the marginalised, Vassanji illustrates how colonial and nativist identities alike are constructed (and also defended) by co-opting the voices of their racialised or gendered 'others'. In the instance of Mariamu's exorcism, Mariamu is shown wedged between the interests of colonial authority, represented by Corbin, who insists that "[w]hat I had witnessed was a crime under [British] law" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 69), and a native patriarchy, "an implicitly longer and more enduring tradition of exclusivity" (Jones 176), that inadequately protects its members, evinced by the sexual predation of Rashid upon his step-daughter,<sup>1</sup> and the mukhi, her uncle, who continues to assert that "the girl had come under [the spirits'] influence . . . He had tried all kinds of remedies. Prayers, potions. What Bwana Corbin witnessed had been the last resort, for which the maalim had asked permission" (*ibid* 71). It is implied within the novel, however, that he is in fact aware of the situation between

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<sup>1</sup> The novel hints at this by describing how Mariamu, "would attack her mother using all sorts of language. . . . Only Rashid the transporter, her stepfather, could speak to her then and calm her down. This had gone on for many monther", only to be followed by an incident wherein Mariamu is found "[sitting] wide-eyed on the floor, indecently, laughing hysterically. Her stepfather went to help her, but she rudely spurned him" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 71).

Mariamou and Rashid,<sup>2</sup> suggesting the complicity of the patriarchy in protecting itself. That it was the missionary ladies who eventually “took the girl with them to the Mission, Miss Elliott leading her triumphantly by the hand” (*ibid* 70) suggests a third angle to Spivak’s formulation of “[w]hite men . . . saving brown women from brown men” (93); namely, that the agency of English womanhood “is contingent upon establishing their racial superiority over [colonised] women” (Sharpe 10). The novel reinforces this point through the women’s literal silencing of Mariamu’s hysterics with “what sounded like two sharp slaps, at which moment the girl gave a startled yelp, almost of surprise, and then became quiet” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 69).

Glossing Anthias, Jones states that “women experience two sets of gender relations or patriarchal relations, those of their own classed and gendered group and those of the main ethnic group represented by the state” (176). Colonised women such as Mariamu are depicted within the novel as being twice—or even triply—oppressed by the hegemonic and overlapping discourses of race and gender, resulting in what Spivak terms the “asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 76). Reduced to a vehicle for different (oftentimes contesting) interests, the subaltern, embodied in Spivak’s example of the sati, is trapped between colonial and nativist patriarchal interests, and left with no space from which to articulate her own interests. Simultaneously written into and then out of History, the ‘other’ is de-scribed as it is made to occupy various positions within discourse to suit the

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<sup>2</sup> The mukhi approaches Corbin shortly after the incident of the exorcism with the suggestion that “Mariama . . . be your housekeeper and cook for you. She will sleep in the kitchen outside. Until the young man Pipa comes and takes her away” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 78). That this might have been motivated by a desire to keep Mariamu away from Rashid is suggested later in the novel by Jamali’s insistence on how, “as long as that railway coolie Rashid hung around his sister, he would never give her [Mariamu’s son]” (*ibid* 190).

agendas of various powers. Significantly, in the clash of opinions following the wedding night, from Pipa's allegation that the "girl [was] not pure", to Rashid, who accuses Corbin of taking "the girl . . . [to] bed", to Corbin, who "[denies] the stepfather's accusation" (*ibid* 89), Mariamu herself "said nothing" (*ibid* 107). McClintock writes that "women served as mediating and threshold figures by means of which men oriented themselves in space, as agents of power and agents of knowledge" (24), and this is illustrated within the novel by how only men wrangle over Mariamu's status. Wedged between opposing factions, Mariamu forms the locus wherein competing interests each seek to secure their own position and stabilise their world view. the novel vividly illustrates to us how, provided with no opportunities to make her own opinions and feelings known, Mariamu is always resigned to being spoken for. Felman raises the pressing question of "[w]hat, in a general manner, does 'speech in the name of' mean? Is it not a precise repetition of the oppressive gesture of *representation*, by means of which, throughout the history of logos, man has reduced the woman to the status of a silence and subordinate object, to something inherently *spoken for*?" (58). Mariamu makes a good case for the dangers of representing an 'other'—even in the altruistic desire to recuperate an identity or voice—due to the inadvertent and perhaps inevitable way in which the subaltern, enmeshed within the power-field of hegemonic discourse, will only be subjected to further silencing, her voice yoked to the agendas of others. The lack of female autonomy depicted within the novel suggests that the retrieval of Mariamu's 'authentic' voice is difficult, if not impossible, without having to resorting to ventriloquism, which would defeat the purpose of attempting to uncover an authentic subaltern voice in the first place.

Silence, then, can function as a subversive marker of resistance in the novel through its evasions of authority and also by how it draws attention to the workings of this authority, for “[w]hen we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work *cannot* say becomes important” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 82). The stubborn silence of an ‘other’ subjectivity is most compellingly registered through the novel’s depictions of Mariamu’s insanity. Lodged between contesting interests that deny her agency, Mariamu’s internal disturbances become framed as hysteria or madness, the result of “shetani enter[ing] her head”, causing her to “come under their influence” and become a “tigress, this quiet girl”, who “ate like a demoness” (*ibid* 71). Her vocal outbursts are confined to cries of suffering and “hyster[ia]” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 69), and her accusations take place not explicitly, but indirectly: she screams “[w]hen the roll-call reached man-lion” (*ibid* 71) in indirect accusation of her stepfather (who is also known as Simba, or lion) as her seducer/rapist. Gilbert and Gubar explain the ways in which madness is a social phenomenon, a construction of pathology. The madwoman is not mad so much as she is categorised as insane in order to make sense of her voice and her desires, which do not align with what society deems to be normative behavior or expressions of culturally-acceptable femininity. Hence, Mariamu’s madness becomes revealed within the novel as a cloak for the social injustices done against her, the lack of care by the community to keep their self-proclaimed “daughter” (*ibid* 72) safe from the predations of its other members. Referring to the complicity between coloniser and colonised, Sarte observes that “[t]he status of ‘native’ is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*”, which “lay[s] claim to and den[ies]

the human condition at the same time” (20). The contradictions inherent in such a situation, Sarte goes on to warn the reader, are “explosive”, culminating in a “phase of violence that “comes back on us” (20). Mariamu’s Mariamu’s unsettling outbursts and her ‘possession’ by shetani manifests the repression of this nervous condition, as the uneasy tensions inherent in a situation wherein the violence enacted against the ‘other’ is disavowed come to be rearticulated by Vassanji along the lines of gender, in order to reveal the exclusions and oppressions that are reinforced within the community itself.

The novel shows how silence can also work to defy description and capture within discourse, resulting in gaps within the narrative that cannot be filled by anything except questions, conjecture and uncertainty. In her reading of *The Book of Secrets*, Toron suggests that “silence is posited not as the binary opposite of agency, but as a form of agency, because it can be employed strategically” (11). This is conveyed within the text through the deflation of Pipa’s expectations on the night of his wedding. He initially reverses the awe—and possibly the intimidation—that he experiences upon perceiving Maramu’s beauty (for “there was such a nobility in her. He could not deserve her”) by assuming a position of authority through his belief that “I’ll be a teacher and teach by inflicting a little pain . . . He felt magnanimous in his manly gentleness and consideration” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 104-5). Unfortunately for Pipa (and for Mariamu, who has to bear the brunt of his anger and disappointment), Mariamu’s corporeal body complicates the fetishisation and myth of virginity. The blood Pipa expects as proof having taken her maidenhead appears as “only a trickle” (*ibid* 105) and serves to trigger Pipa’s insecurities concerning the chastity of his new bride. The unknowability of Mariamu’s body—which constitutes the site of so many invested

meanings within a patriarchal culture (from morality to health to fortune), and through which Pipa had sought to stabilise a sense of his masculine superiority—subverts the arbitrary signs that are associated with the breaching of the hymen: namely, bleeding as proof of virginity. For in truth, vigorous exercise or activity can cause the hymen to break down on its own, and women can be born with only partially intact hymens. Other possibilities indicated by the bit of blood within the novel are, respectively, goat’s blood, spilled on the sheets as a symbolic gesture,<sup>3</sup> menstrual blood, the onset of a miscarriage, the actual breeching of Mariamu’s hymen, or an injury, caused either by Pipa’s inexperience or his ungentle treatment. The ambiguity of Mariamu’s body demonstrates the impossibility of accurately ‘reading’ the state of her body through the “soiled sheet” (*ibid* 105) and the arbitrary signs of virginity, thus resulting in the undermining of the myth of virginity. When Pipa laments, “would he . . . ever be certain?” (*ibid* 156), Vassanji provides us with his answer through how the text falls open to multiple interpretations, providing no resolution to the mysteries it raises by keeping all its possibilities in play. Hence, even when Pipa manages to lay his hands on Corbin’s diary, he is nevertheless incapable of reading it or discovering “the answer to his torment. What was the relationship between the ADC and his Mariamu” (*ibid* 172).

The unknowability of Mariamu’s body has the effect of unsettling attempts to locate a masculine identity through the subordination of its ‘others’—in this case, women.<sup>4</sup> McAfee argues that “[w]omen have historically been identified with their

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<sup>3</sup> “The blood that they go around showing after the wedding night—do you think it is always the woman’s ay? Why not a chicken’s, a goat’s” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 121).

<sup>4</sup> It is implied in the novel that Pipa never quite recovers from the blow that he receives from that blood-stained sheet, in which he is never able to entirely discern the facts of his wife’s sexual history—when they go to bed, Pipa curses “the fate that was his frozen

bodies and thus seen, in the history of philosophy, more as extended rather than as thinking things” (81); yet, when Vassanji foregrounds the physicality of the female bodies in the novel, he links the identities of women with their bodies and bodily functions in order to show how bodies can also be interpreted as sites of resistance and recuperation.<sup>5</sup> Mondal suggests that history, being “based on the archive, on the document, on some relation to institutional power, cannot grasp the experiences that are undocumented” (144). The text’s awareness of the limited range of representations and points of view available within the historical archive is evinced by how Mariamu signs her marriage register with “her name as Miss Elliott of the Mission had taught her during her short stay” (*ibid* 85). Not only is the name that appears in archive not in Mariamu’s native, spoken language, it is not even a name that she necessarily acknowledges outside of the event. Falling outside daily use, the name that Miss Elliott teaches Mariamu to write functions as merely a legal identity relevant only within the context of colonial administration. Aside from the “accounts of explorers, the great travellers . . . reports of their lectures” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 53), historical documents that retain a privileged position within the academy, Vassanji seeks to highlight another knowledge of the past, retained in the experiences of the body—irreducible, undeniable—which are tied to memory and not available in the public record. Suggesting how personal stories and private information, which never make it into historical representation, are nevertheless important and true, the novel converts Mariamu’s voicelessness into the keystone of her

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heart, his inert loins” (*ibid* 108). Literally and figuratively a sign of his male impotency, Pipa’s loins are rendered “completely dead” (*ibid* 106) by Mariamu’s subversion of patriarchal authority.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Pipa describes his mother as having “[a]n oval face with smooth cheeks and pointed chin, eyes as big as plums. She had a smile in those days. Big haunches and warm breasts and a smell that was all things to him. She had strong legs, and a little swell in the belly, and she was the most mysterious and lovely thing in his life.” (*ibid* 128)



resistance. The opacity of her motivations and thoughts leave Pipa only with endless questions of “[w]hy? To steal back her secret—her shame—from the Englishman? To prove to her husband her innocence? Or to permit herself—and her husband—to take revenge on the *mzungu*” (*ibid* 172). Mariamu’s impenetrability holds open the gap in knowledge, problematising closure and serving as resistance against the hegemonic grasp of a universal worldview. Ringed about by multiple, oftentimes contradictory signifiers and meanings, the character of Mariamu becomes impossible to fully order within any schema of knowledge, resulting in the unstable epistemological status of her narrative, which ultimately eludes attempts to finalise or concretise its meaning.

#### 4.2 History and Haunting

In the novel, Pipa, upon discovering Corbin’s diary amidst the deceased Mariamu’s belongings, begins to “[feel] possessed . . . if through it she had chosen him, he could not cast it aside” (*ibid* 203-4). Gripped by the unrelenting desire to find out “[w]hat Mariamu never discussed, never acknowledged, never denied. One day he would release the spirit in the book, and it would tell him” (*ibid* 204), Mariamu “often came to haunt [Pipa’s] imagination” (*ibid* 207). Vassanji likens the disturbance of history by memory to a kind of haunting, shown when Pipa is tormented by “[i]mages . . . of Mariamu and the Englishman together . . . grotesquely suggestive; but they were kind, these specters, shadowy and blurred . . . nevertheless sinful, deeply hurtful” (271). The events of the past literally haunt Pipa, who cannot seem to move beyond them. He dreams constantly about Mariamu and even speaks to her ghost; he brings “dried fruit, milk, a *pachedi* to mosque” in an attempt to propitiate her, “[b]ut she did not rest” (*ibid*

217). Mariamu is a character who refuses to remain relegated to the shadowy memories of the past; instead, she keeps unexpectedly re-appearing in connection to events and people. She is, for instance, the individual who initially stole away the book that Fernandes now possesses; she is also Rita's mother-in-law and Aku's biological mother. And despite being dead, Mariamu continues to trouble the present during Pipa's wedding to Remti, his second wife, demonstrated in the novel when "the memory of silent, beautiful Mariamu lingered, a cloud over the exciting event that was the wedding, casting a shadow that would only deepen" (*ibid* 201). Slipping through the barriers established by time and space, the elusiveness of her haunting, coupled with its demanding persistence, reflects the manner in which subaltern histories possess the present in the form of memories, dreams and other supernatural events.

Caruth tells us that "the [traumatic] event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event" (4-5). It is no coincidence, then, that Mariamu, as a marginal character who embodies a subaltern history in her silences and her opacity, continues to haunt Pipa after her death, literally becoming a ghost who troubles her husband with late-night visitations and cryptic conversations. Marked by their transgressive ability, ghosts inhabit the line between the living and the dead, between science and superstition (which can be understood as a form of knowledge that can never be fully certified, for the causes and effects of supernatural events cannot be stabilised by logic, nor comprehensively understood). The ghost is a partial presence whose existence cannot be verified by observation; nor does it respect borders and categories of knowledge. Thus Mariamu "spoke to [Pipa], but she did not say

much. She had never been one for lengthy conversations, and now, as before, on certain matters she was completely silent” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 211). Even the “maalims and joshis or others of whatever faith who had acquired local renown for their knowledge of the world of spirits”, from whom Pipa attempts to obtain answers, are unable to give “the exact answers” to his persistent questioning (*ibid*). And when Pipa attempts to “release Mariamu” and tell her that she is “free to go and rest in peace” with his forgiveness, Mariamu’s spirit, far from being appeased, visits him that very night, “turning the Maalim’s reasoning on its head” (*ibid*). And so “Mariamu remained, as did Pipa’s questions to which she would give no answer” (*ibid* 212), denying any attempt to resolve the past and put it to rest.

Even the ghostliness of the ghost is cast into doubt within the novel, evinced by the constant tension generated by the uncertainty surrounding Mariamu’s presence in Pipa’s life. Mariamu’s ghost poses a threat to Pipa’s mental well-being in her incarnation as a “bloody apparition” that “would get up to claw at him in anger”, causing him to “recoil in horror and surprise” (*ibid* 207); she also soothes him in the form of a pleasing memory that Pipa shapes of her: a wife obedient to his chidings, who would “become her normal self”, “quite alluring in the green pachedi” and smiling at him (*ibid* 207-8). Later, the novel tells us that, having plagued Pipa for so long, “Mariamu and her book were allowed to recede into the background; or perhaps she simply allowed Pipa and Remti to lavish attention on Amin unhampered” (*ibid* 264), leading the reader to question if Mariamu truly is a ghost, or if her manifestations merely point towards the guilt and anxieties experienced by Pipa, such as when she accuses him of letting the memory of her fade: “how easily men forget. You are happy now” (*ibid* 217). Nevertheless, the power

that Mariamu's memory commands over Pipa is evident, as he sets up a shrine of sorts to her in spite of objections from his wife, Remti, for Pipa feels that "I have to do this ... or there will be no peace" (*ibid* 207). In spite of being dead, little more than a "jiv, a soul", Mariamu literally inhabits an entire room of her own, a "empty storeroom . . . swept and cleaned" that "became hers" (*ibid* 208). That the storeroom occupies a liminal position within Pipa's property is significant, situated as it is with "the doorway opening into the street" on its left, and "the entrance to the inner, living room" on its right (*ibid* 208).

Comprising the boundary between public (the street) and private (the living/bedroom), the storeroom—Mariamu's room—is itself possessed of an uncertain status that reflects the marginal condition of its owner—not only as a woman in a patriarchal society, but also as an uncertain and ghostly reminder of the past in a fast-modernising present.<sup>7</sup>

When the text describes how Rita stumbles upon "an old cemetery. Souls lying exposed to the sea ... stories of possessed women. At the head of the graveyard was an ancient mission base. Somewhere nearby ... was a slave market, even more ancient" (*ibid* 250), the scene invariably recalls the memory of Mariamu through its mention of tales of possession. The scene itself is suggestive of repressed narratives that never come to light—instead they continue to haunt the landscape or the parent text, just as the past haunts the present, or the subaltern haunts historical discourse, reminding us of what the latter has cast out in order to present itself as whole. The graveyard is a site for many past lives and many lived tales that have become buried, hidden, and forgotten; the gravestone evinces the complexity and length of a life neatly compressed into a name and two dates. The dead are seemingly contained: physically, within their graves; temporally, within the past; epistemologically, for they are dead, not alive, fixed for eternity. Nevertheless, they

possess a liminal, almost inappropriate presence that cannot be entirely controlled or explained. Never entirely at rest, these ghostly presences continue to flit restlessly in and out of the awareness of the community, and also the margins of the text.

Chambers suggests that “knowledge emerges in the ongoing narration of the world seeking to cure the wound of memory.” (*Culture After Humanism* 39). Yet memory, as the text evinces, cannot be extended into the realm of common experience due to its subjective nature. Aku’s memories of the war, for example, are “always in the same scene of utter chaos” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 187), demonstrating the inaccessibility of his trauma, which lies outside of official available reconstructions of the past. Thus, of his friendship with Desouza, Fernandes reflects that “[t]oo much ... had happened to us that took us into private worlds we were unable to share” (*ibid* 315), suggesting the intense interiority of personal experience, which language alone cannot articulate, and which can never enter into the public realm of knowledge. Likewise, when Rita and Ali “asked [the Eisens] a lot of questions about Germany ... about the war” (*ibid* 286), they realise belatedly that some events—in this case the Holocaust—cannot be spoken of and are impossible to relate, for where language falls short, so too does the ability to comprehend what has transpired fail. In his reflections upon the nature of memory, Roth writes, “trauma is a part of one’s past that seems to demand inclusion in any narrative of the development of the present but that makes any narrative seem painfully inadequate” (205). Because knowledge is what emerges from language, a subaltern memory that cannot enter fully into narration is a deeply subversive presence that never reveals its face, and yet which can never be laid to rest. The events of a subaltern past are a story that can never be told, a book that cannot be shut; unlike the

panels of a door, which “quarrel by day and make up at night” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 101), the open wound that is memory never ceases its ‘quarrel’ with history, and thus resists containment and closure.

The constant challenge that an unresolved and unresolvable subaltern past poses to dominant or definitive versions of history is such that even the boundaries of the present are threatened by memories and ghosts. This is demonstrated when Aku, upon sensing “a call, an urge, a pull, from behind—from the storeroom, from Mariamu”, feels as if reality itself “had receded into a dream” and “grown distant” (*ibid* 218). Eluding official investigation, the subaltern history circumvents official efforts to uncover it, evinced by how Pipa’s storeroom is raided several times and even subjected to being burnt down once; yet Corbin’s diary, now in Pipa’s possession, escaped unscathed, and “subsequent police raids found nothing incriminating” (*ibid* 225). The presence of the subaltern serves as a reminder that official History, instead of being a grand narrative, is always fragmentary and incomplete, a patchwork construct vulnerable to other narratives that emerge from the past and seek to modify its structure, subjecting history to multiple revisions and reversions. Put differently, history becomes haunted by its incompleteness, embodied in the figure of the subaltern, which, through “a critical language that extracts its ethics from the experiences, practices and proposals of the subaltern”, constitutes “an ‘other’ knowledge that irritates, disturbs and ultimately disrupts a preceding arrangement of knowledge and power” (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 21). The novel shows how history is perpetually in danger of being overwhelmed or overtaken by a profusion of voices and possibilities, due to the inclusion of narrative threads that insinuate themselves into the main narrative, which comes out of the pen of the white man

administrator, Corbin, adding layers of depth and nuances of meaning to his story. Fernandes, for instance, mentions in his miscellany that Henry Johnson, who first appears in the novel as a man trying to escape a debt (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 26), later comes to be recreated in the writing of Rider Haggard, who “based one of his characters on him” (*ibid* 94). The text makes a point of showing the reader how characters, even real people, are constantly being represented and written about in various discourses. Just as the original Henry Johnson becomes haunted by a set of shadowy doubles, alternate versions of himself, imperfect copies that keep permutating and reappearing as uncanny, yet recognisable, selves, so too is historiography threatened by subaltern narratives, “living interrogations that ghost my understanding with other stories, with others” (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 18), which offer alternate readings of past and undermine the universal status ascribed to the concept of a universal history.

The figure of the ‘other’—which manifests variously in the novel as the colonised, the subaltern, or the marginalised within any community—becomes transfigured by Vassanji’s invocation of its excessive and transgressive potential, drawing attention to how the secrets, silences, and unspoken histories of the ‘other’ generate a sense of discontinuity and alienation within the trajectory of Eurocentric modernity. Manifesting in Vassanji’s novel as a presence simultaneously disruptive and opaque, impossible to fully reveal, the presence of the ‘other’ constantly works to disturb and trouble the intertwined narratives of history and nation. Examples of this are evinced by symbols or sites of multiple signification within the text, such as the character of Mariamu, who, being always represented through the eyes of others, is ultimately rendered inaccessible to the reader, in addition to the characters of the story. In other

words, the very act of representation of the colonised by their colonisers ultimately serves only to gesture towards the emptiness of the image or stereotype, in turn resulting in the ultimate deferral or elision of meaning. Thus the silence of the other—its secrets, its very impenetrability—becomes rendered by Vassanji as a constant movement, an uncanny proliferation of signifiers that remain in flux throughout the entire novel. By addressing the attempts (and ultimate failure) of history, narrative and language to contain and accurately depict reality, the novel suggests that the nature of truth is not monolithic but fragmentary and comprised of multiple facets. The proliferation of incommensurate, even contradictory depictions of reality simultaneously points out the limitations of universalism, even as it results in the relativisation of truth, demonstrating the instability of the boundaries of narratives, as well as inability of any one narrative to fully encompass (or claim to understand) the nature of what it describes. The eruptions of a subaltern past and its evocations of polyphony, however, do not simply celebrate postmodern fragmentation: these ulterior narratives stand witness to what Bhabha terms “cultures of a postcolonial *contra-modernity* [which] may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, resistant to its oppressive assimilationist technologies” (9). An alternative temporality of the now, *contra-modernities* invade modernity in order to force open the sense of a linear history within which the ‘archaic’ and the ‘modern’ are hierarchised. In so doing, the present is destabilised, its narrative fractured by other times and other places, knowledges that operate in excess of modernity’s frame of reference. The faultlines in the grand narrative of global history are forced wide open; the resultant “fractures in discourse” (Ashcroft, *On Post-Colonial Futures* 112) reveal the histories of Europe’s ‘others’, whose cultures and resources the



West is indebted to for its development and self-conceptualisation, and whose role in history the West abjects in what Bhabha terms a process of recognition and disavowal.

## 5. Conclusion

Constituting an intervention into the various bottle-books moulded out of the clay of Africa's past, be they Orientalist visions derived from local tales, such as the story of Sinbad, or colonial biographies written by former administrators, or Western historiography itself, Vassanji's novel reworks the story of Aladdin's lamp to suggest, on one level, the rupture of imprisoning frameworks of representation, which, in their devaluation and hierarchisation of alternative ways of being in the world, oppress the souls captured within their discourse; and on another, the power of postcolonial literature, itself a genii capable of forging whole new worlds through its presentation of "new angles at which to enter reality" (Rushdie 15). The novel points to all the ways in which closure or containment denote an act of power, which fetters and distorts its subjects within discourse. As act that fences in (and also keeps out), closing delineates boundaries, curtails movement, and seeks to bind time, in addition to space. The text's resistance of closure effects a turning away—from insularity, from stasis—in order to seek ways out, to undermine the narratives within which one is contained. Drawing on Vassanji's example of clay, we are led to understand that the infinite potentiality of the clay resides in its malleability; thus the vessel which would claim to be the essential or universal embodiment of a pot is a thing of impossibility, for the very rigidity of its structure pre-empts any claims towards transcendentalism. A 'complete' or 'whole' structure—static, hermetically sealed, stubborn, immovable, unmalleable—is one that precludes the possibility of movement or growth. Attempts to reinforce a universal ideal through the suppression of the plurality of perspectives serve only to emphasise the faultlines and

cracks in its structure, the internal inconsistency of its doubled logic. In seeking to address the injustices of the past, our very experience of modernity, formerly rendered seamless and undisturbed by Benjamin's conception of "homogeneous, empty time" (261), becomes assailed by a revisitation that demands the revision of the dominant paradigm through the secret's contribution to, and subsequent alteration of, the twinned and twined narratives of humanism and (Eurocentric) history that have fundamentally shaped our present. The indeterminate existence of the secret is such that it destabilises epistemological certainty and poses a threat to the status of Eurocentric knowledge. Therefore, the blank that is the secret is not the blank of an unwritten page, merely waiting to be filled in and slotted neatly into the grand narrative of History. Instead, it is "its interrogation, its interruption: an invitation to reconceptualise and reconfigure modernity itself" (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 19). This disrupts the possibility of closure within any form of discourse, which necessarily seeks to establish boundaries, delineate meaning, and impose an arbitrary outer limit upon the myriad possibilities and contradictions of identity and experience, all in order to stabilise knowledge. Bhabha puts forth the idea that "the boundary becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing*" (5), suggesting that the boundary is also the point at which knowledge approaches its limit and fails to encompass or understand what lies beyond. Reflecting this, the plot-structure of Vassanji's text maintains the 'gap' by keeping possibilities open and leaving various narrational threads trailing off into futures that are never entirely spelled out. The reader is left with the understanding that, like history, a narrative can never be truly closed off, for to do so would be to deny the possibility of growth and change.

The novel's self-reflexive treatment of the constructedness of narratives of identity, history and knowledge, which are produced through language, compels an awareness of how the 'other' becomes silenced through its constitution within colonial discourse (simultaneously a consolidation of hegemonic power over its colonies, and also the framework of knowledge through which a sense of the imperial self and national identity emerged). And yet, as Gikandi asserts, it would be a mistake to assume that the "lives and experiences of people in so-called Third World countries are wretched because they are perpetual victims of their colonial past" ("Colonial Culture and the Question of Identity" *Maps of Englishness* 15). Thus, Vassanji foregrounds the secret—something not known, hidden away, and sometimes forgotten—in order to demonstrate how its presence is a haunting and uncanny echo that destabilises the stories told around it, revealing, "in its gaps and silences, in the disturbances of its logic, that which has been repressed" (Mondal 98). Secrets abound within the novel; woven into the fabric of the present, they hint at stories untold and histories unacknowledged. Aku, for instance, demands to know, "[w]hat is this secret? Tell me about Mariamu—my mother—who was she" (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 281); Fernandes describes Gregory as possessing "a certain secretiveness to him, a reserve; there remained sides unrevealed, a trait I attribute to national character" (*ibid* 268). Vassanji is careful to point out that secrets are fragile, evinced by the exposure of the "secret liaison" (*ibid* 257) between Parviz and Patani that culminates in her suicide. At the same time, secrets can also create room for agency and freedom, such as in the case of Rita and Ali's "illicit love", wherein the veil of silence allowed them to engage, undetected, "in an exploration, in joyful play" (*ibid*). The ultimate mystery that surrounds the figure of Mariamu demonstrates how secrets inhere

within the very constitution of reality and serve as hidden narratives that, while never fully revealed, threaten to re-articulate the past, producing “an ‘other’ knowledge that irritates, disturbs and ultimately disrupts a preceding arrangement of knowledge and power” (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 21). The very potential of the threat posed by these secret narratives is such that they hold open the border, keeping the status of knowledge in a constant state of abeyance, denying the possibility of a final word.

The relativising effects of the back and forth passage between histories, cultures, communities, peoples and identities create a destabilisation within the boundaries of any dominant narrative, establishing cracks, and prying them open. Towards the end of the novel, Vassanji turns our attention to the story of Anarkali, set “[i]n Mughal times in India” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 300). Sealed up in a cave for disobeying the emperor’s order, Anarkali manages to escape, for her “mother came to claim mercy for her daughter. So Akber, who is famed for his justice, instructed that the cave be left open, at the back, and Anarkali was free” (*ibid*). Exemplifying the complex criss-crossings of history, our beholdenness to this past, and its unexpected intrusions into the present, we are told that “Akber had offered Anarkali’s mother anything she wished in exchange for her services to him” (*ibid*). At the same time, Anarkali’s imprisonment signifies to us the oppressive and murderous effects of a discourse that draws lines between people or around them, be they of class, such as the forbidden love “between the prince of a great dynasty and a servant” (*ibid*), race, gender, sexuality, or otherwise. The novel suggests, then, that by maintaining an open cave, in acknowledging the past and the narratives that comprise our identities and which we guard so jealously, but also in letting them go, we, like Anarkali, will gain freedom. For the gap thus established by “a critical, open and

vulnerable history . . . a narration, an account, suspended between inclusion and exclusion, between representation and repression, in which the final word never arrives” (Chambers, *Culture After Humanism* 11), while leaving us open to self-assessment, to reconfigurations of understanding, to potential hurt and bewilderment, “is true because the pain it causes makes us live” (Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* 300). In seeking to wrench the trajectory of our current global narrative from its moorings, Vassanji directs us towards new horizons where endless possibilities await, opening up fresh avenues that point towards the potential for freedom and change, thus creating new thresholds of possibility for the reader. For, to echo Rushdie, "redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it" (14).

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