

HAIRCUT: STORIES FROM NEPAL

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY  
OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

AUGUST 2013

By Ranjan Adiga

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

S. Shankar, Chairperson

Susan Schultz

Paul Lyons

Gary Pak

Sankaran Krishna

Keywords: Fiction, Nepal.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to all my committee members for their time, guidance, and participation in this project. I am especially indebted to my chairperson, Professor S. Shankar, for his guidance and invaluable suggestions. He has helped me become a better writer, and hopefully, a wiser person.

I'd also like to thank all my colleagues and teachers at the English Department for continuously inspiring me to become a better student and teacher of literature.

## ABSTRACT

My doctoral dissertation, *Haircut: Stories from Nepal*, is a collection of short stories set in contemporary Kathmandu, Nepal. My goal is to explore the lives of ordinary Nepalis grappling for meaning in a changing society. Caught as they are in the rapidly transforming socio-political map of Kathmandu, my characters battle through issues of tradition and modernity, the individual and society. Capturing the complex lives of people within the limited confines of a story challenges and excites me.

Stylistically, I'm indebted to R.K. Narayan and Chinua Achebe, among others. I try to capture the rhythm and resonance of the Nepali language in my fiction, which calls for a certain "refashioning" of the English language. Besides translating vernacular idioms into English, I also experiment with syntax to create a narrative voice that is natural to its surrounding. The practice of interpreting Nepali culture in the English language makes me constantly reevaluate the flexibilities of language and narrative structure.

In a concluding chapter of the dissertation, I attempt to explore the aesthetic and ideological implications of indigenizing the English language by writers of Indian and African origins. I believe it is crucial for my growth as a writer to be engaged in critical discussions about the politics of language-choice, particularly within the framework of postcolonial fiction. As a writer from Nepal I don't write about a postcolonial experience, but in choosing to write in

English, I am confronted with the same concerns that are central to any discussion about language in postcolonial studies: why do we write in English? Whom do we write for? What kinds of appropriation and deformation of language occur in our work? Do our aesthetic choices imply a narrative of resistance? Being aware of the nexus between language, culture, and history inspires in me a greater appreciation for the power of language, which is critical for my growth as a writer.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgement	i
Abstract	ii
Introduction: A Nepali Storyteller	1-16
Pinky	17-27
Haircut	28-38
Ginger Tea	39-56
The Smuggler	57-66
High Heels	67-82
The King's Statue	83-96
First Division	97-109
America	110-127
The Politics of Language Choice in Postcolonial Fiction	128-156

## A NEPALI STORYTELLER

My sensibilities as a storyteller were formed in Kathmandu, a city of old temples and narrow alleys. In 1991-92, when I was barely a teenager, Nepal had had been ruled by monarchy for over two hundred years. Freedom of press was non-existent, and news about palace politics circulated through secretive routes of gossip. This was a town where rumors and stories had an easy sway over people.

I grew up at a time when King Birendra was our benign and reclusive leader. His public popularity stemmed from the fact that he wasn't as dictatorial as his father, King Mahendra. But we knew little about our king. He remained shrouded in mystery behind his palace walls. He wasn't a dictator whose terror held the nation together. King Birendra was out of reach. Even *Gorkhapatra*, the state-owned newspaper, carried little else besides perfunctory reports about the king's rare public appearances, which included temple visits or ribbon-cutting ceremonies. In such an environment, the favorite pastime of Kathmandu's bourgeoisie was to speculate, in hushed conversations in teashops and temple courtyards, about the intriguing lives of the royal family. Anything that was faintly newsworthy, such as the king and queen's disagreement over their choice of a prospective daughter-in-law, traveled fast from one mouth to another and reached every household by late evening. No one was arrested for inappropriate curiosity as long as the king wasn't disturbed.

I grew up in a small family. My father was a second-class government officer, my mother a housewife, and my older brother and I studied in a Jesuit school run by Indian missionaries. The British-educated king was the patron of the school. His family's picture was strategically

placed in every classroom above the blackboard and the wooden cross. In dark hallways, our cassock-wearing South Indian teachers encouraged us to scale great heights in Science and Mathematics so that one day we could dutifully serve our king. Our morning classes would begin with patriotic poetry recitation, followed by rigorous lessons in trigonometry and Newton's Laws of Motion. Literature was never high on the list, which perhaps explains why I was poor academically. I would spend long afternoons in the all-boy's school anxious to get home and listen to stories about our neighbors, and if I was lucky, some good-natured gossip about the king and queen who stared at us silently from those framed pictures.

We had no TV, so story recitation brought the family together every evening. Mother would gossip about the neighbors, father would complain about trivial bureaucratic matters, and my brother and I would sneak in a complaint or two about our teachers. Every now and then, Mitini Ama, a respected source of rumors, would stop by. She was an elderly widow whose faded saris gave off a stale whiff of medicaments. Though she carried an expression of someone whose duty it was to look sad, the light in her eyes returned if she had an interesting gossip about the palace, especially if it involved the king's fondness for imported wine. The king was known for his taste in expensive liquor, which he enjoyed with cigars lit with thousand rupee notes—or, so the story went. The queen encouraged his habits so she could wield power over royal matters. Any such story that trickled down the chain of command at the palace court would no doubt have had been molded for public consumption by the time it reached us, but fine print wasn't my concern. What mattered was the vividness with which Mitini Ama mimicked the king's drunken slurs, his palms clasped as he pleaded for the queen's forgiveness, which her majesty repudiated with a silent posture. When Mitini Ama whispered, I'd have to strain my ears to catch every word. Long after she had left, the images lingered in my mind. I'd spend hours dwelling on

details like the golden embroidery in the hem of the queen's sari, or the diamonds encrusted on the stem of the king's glass, wondering about this world that was so intriguing, so out of my reach.

Since I wasn't exposed to much literature, my imagination was limited. But that changed, when I went to college in India. In the small town of Chandigarh in northern India, I became a voracious reader of the daily newspaper, *Times of India*, which the newspaper man hurled at my door from his bicycle every morning. The thud of the rolled-up newspaper was my wake-up call, and I wouldn't leave my bed until I had devoured every word in it. The smell of fresh ink and the variety of stories captivated me. I especially looked forward to the daily comic strip that featured "the common man," deftly illustrated by R.K. Laxman, the younger brother of R.K. Narayan. I was delighted that something as mundane as a newspaper could carry a world of wonderful stories about ordinary people—the dull gaze of the king couldn't reach as far as India.

Laxman was the first person I recognized as a professional storyteller. His dhoti-clad common man represented the aspirations and foibles of the average Indian, and Laxman, with his pithy one-liners, always managed to convey more than what he said. I was drawn to the humor in his storytelling, the kind of humor that also made me think. It wasn't just the narrative embedded in those simple drawings, but the manner in which Laxman expressed them. Without losing the gossipy voice of storytelling, Laxman displayed an artistic boldness that I hadn't been exposed to. His message was subtle but his tone wasn't hushed. Laxman's comic strips inspired in me a thought that I could perhaps do something similar in life. I had always been attracted to the spark of storytelling. In Chandigarh, that attraction became addictive, especially when I later discovered the library.

The small library in the neighborhood was, in fact, a retired army general's private study. His good fortune had allowed him the luxury to buy and display leather-bound books that he himself had no interest in reading. As a philanthropic gesture, this man—Army uncle, as he was known—would open his doors to the neighborhood youth every evening. We could borrow books for a small amount that had to be deposited in a box every month. Although he professed to never having the time to read, he always encouraged me. Perhaps it was the sincerity with which I showed up at his door every evening, or perhaps it was the patronizing benevolence he had towards Nepalis. He called me a “chinky,” a slur typically attributed to slanted-eyed Nepalis or North-Eastern Indians, a community that remains ethnically and geographically marginalized in India. “You look more like a Punjabi than a chinky,” Army uncle would say and let me borrow his books for free. I didn't mind what I perceived as friendly slanders. What mattered were the books. It was Army uncle who told me that R.K. Laxman's brother was this “R.K. Narayan fellow, supposedly a great writer.” This was how I discovered Narayan. In finding him, I also discovered a part of myself.

My love for Narayan began with *Swami and Friends*. The town of Malgudi, with its dusty lanes and cigarette shops, reminded me of Kathmandu alleys. The people of Malgudi spent much of their time drinking coffee and gossiping, and for the mischievous narrator, Swaminathan, simple affairs like preparing for an exam or losing a cricket match became momentous, life-changing events. I was drawn to Narayan's prose, his easy and natural style. His humor was as effective and supple as his brother's, but while Laxman's comic strips focused on one character, Narayan's Malgudi bustled with colorful, talkative people whose boisterousness masked the difficulties of their day-to-day lives. From *Swami and Friends*, I moved to the

*Painter of Signs*, and eventually to *The Guide*, a novel that continues to be a great influence in my writing.

Narayan's fiction is often criticized as non-representative of the "real India," a nation of magnificent riches and poverty, teeming with color and chaos, grappling with colonialism and its aftermath. Narayan's setting is usually a small, tranquil village, seemingly far removed from the upheaval of socio-political unrest. His style, too, has an undisturbed simplicity. Critic Michael Gorra compares Narayan's detail of a kitchen in *The Guide*—"a wooden ledge on the smoke-stained wall"—to Flaubert's in *Madame Bovary*: "Some flies on the table were crawling up the glasses that had been used, and buzzing as they drowned themselves in the dregs of the cider." I'm no one to dispute Flaubert's artistry, but for a seventeen-year old, just discovering the richness of literature, the level of specificity in "a wooden ledge on the smoke-stained wall" was enough to convey, as Gora later points out, young Raju's longing for the tin of sugar kept just out of his reach. Narayan chose his details sparingly, but each detail conveyed an emotion that was essential to my understanding of the character. Narayan's writing never strained beyond its boundaries. He seemed to embody Flannery O'Connor's maxim: "The longer you look at one object, the more of the world you see in it."

Narrated in first- and third-person point-of-view and slipping between past and present, *The Guide* follows the life of Raju, through his trials and tribulations as a mischievous village boy, a charlatan tourist guide, a manipulative lover, a jailed crook, and finally a reluctant holy man. Raju's life unfolds against the backdrop of a changing society, but the change is quietly woven into the narrative through mundane details. The trucks bring timber and iron, the missionaries bring Christianity, the railway engine rolls in, "pulling a couple of cars," and the superintendent utters the word *bank* "with a proud emphasis." Here is a sentence from the novel

in which parked trucks disorient the young narrator's view of the world: "I lost to some extent my freedom under the tamarind tree, because trucks were parked there. I climbed into them and played. No one minded me." In three simple sentences Narayan conveys Raju's profound experience of abandonment and discovery. Even back then, despite my nascent reading skills, I could recognize that Narayan's details did their work quietly. Those details were immediately recognizable, but they also exhibited deeper complexities of the world and human nature, which Raju and I both were struggling to grasp. The novel's true worth was put to the test when Army uncle asked me what the fuss was about. I was able to describe the plot very enthusiastically, but the emotional and spiritual journey of the character couldn't be put down in words: it was something to be experienced. When Army uncle dismissed my explanation as a "heap of dung" I knew I was onto something.

I spent many months rereading *The Guide*. Raju's dubious methods didn't color my overall judgment of him as a man of great ambition and charisma. He represented to me a country that I was increasingly becoming fascinated by. A country where people argued and criticized openly, where they expressed ambition, greed, spiritual devotion, creativity, guile, and love with free abandonment. In India's shadow, Nepal started to feel small and inconsequential. With *The Guide* tucked under my bed, I decided in that one-room apartment in Chandigarh, that I would settle down in India and become a storyteller.

I spent the next six years in India, which culminated with a two-year stint in advertising in Bombay. The year was 2001. I was a junior creative executive in one of the city's premier advertising agencies. Advertising taught me to create crisp, light-hearted stories about everyday objects. The ultimate goal was to sell, so the story had to instantaneously inform and evoke an emotion. The pressure was always on to write a two-word story and make it a bestseller. I

learned to sharpen my writing and observation skills. The jobs that landed on my desk were the types that the seniors couldn't be bothered with: 30% discount notices, or small, social awareness campaigns. One project that I'm proud of is a three-ad campaign, each with a picture of two street children, posing like super models in rags, with the headline Winter Collection accompanied by this fine print: "To 33% of children in Mumbai, garbage is fashion. Donate your clothes this Christmas." Advertising yielded instant result and gratification. If the client liked your team's work, you had the pleasure of seeing it published in a small corner of the local newspaper. The problem began when I started dwelling more on the fine print: if 33% of the city's children were living in the streets, their stories deserved to be read on a canvas bigger than a 2-column advertisement. But advertising had no place for dwellers. Your creative skills were promptly needed on the next campaign—time was money. As for me, I had, by this time, become a habitual reader of fiction, particularly those that used Bombay as its setting: *Midnight's Children*, *A Fine Balance*, *Love and Longing in Bombay*. These novels presented the dispossessed as complex, human characters. I learned that the 33% were real people. They were pale-eyed or slouch-shouldered, and they suffered from toothaches just like other people. In reading about them I learned to embrace the complex universe that is each character. This reading habit ultimately proved detrimental to my advertising career.

Of all these novels set in Bombay, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* spoke to me most intimately because of the way Mistry captured the panorama of the city through the lives of four ordinary individuals. Described only as The City by the Sea, Bombay emerges as a symbol of resilience embodied by four dispossessed characters who learn to endure and aspire despite the brutality of daily hardships. If Dickens' London was thrust against the backdrop of the industrial revolution, Mistry sets his novel during the 1970's Emergency, a period when the Indian State

launched a massive crackdown on civil liberties and political opposition. But Mistry does not let the political story become the foreground. The social conflict is embedded in the train compartments, in the streets and buildings, on the railway station. An excerpt from the novel:

The long-anticipated rumbles at last rippled through the compartments, and the train shivered down its long steel spine. Relief lit the passenger's faces. As the compartments trumbled past the level-crossing, everyone craned to see the cause of their delay. Three uniformed policemen stood by the hastily covered awaiting its journey to the morgue. Some passengers touched their foreheads or put their hands together and murmured, 'Ram Ram.'

In the hands of Mistry, a connoisseur of details, we see layers of history intermingle with human emotion. His characters lack the freedom of imagination to create *The Magician's Ghetto* of *Midnight's Children*. Mistry isn't preoccupied with the wizardry of language; it's his reality and specificity that allow us to get lost in the intimacy of human emotions. Mistry's genius was in his use of details, which weren't unusual or pointedly symbolic, but always perfectly chosen to illustrate the mood of the moment: "The walls were badly in need of paint. He played with the discolored plastic blotches, the way he did with clouds, imagining animals and landscapes." Like Narayan, Mistry conveyed complex emotions through minute trivia that collectively represented a recognizable reality that I was drawn to. As an MFA student in creative writing a few years later, I learned to appreciate the wizardry of Rushdie and writers of different styles and genres—which I will explore in some detail later—but traditional realism became deeply rooted in my aesthetic fabric. It is the style that I'm more naturally drawn to as a writer.

In the few years I spent in India, Nepal had been undergoing its own political revolution that had started in distant villages. Kathmandu had always been the center of bureaucratic and

palace politics while the rest of the country remained inaccessible and poor. The foreign aid that the country relied for its economic wellbeing rarely made its way to the rural parts, and a 1962 constitutional amendment declaring Nepal as a Hindu state had ensured that ethnic minorities and non-Hindus remained marginalized as land-less laborers. In the mid-1990's, however, a quiet resistance that had been building up for decades managed to consolidate into a guerilla movement. Armed with basic rifles and ammunition, and led by the charismatic Prachanda, this group declared "people's war" against the establishment. They established a scrappy military wing—following Mao's strategy of capturing state power through a peasant uprising. The rest of the decade, the Maoists forced their way into Kathmandu's consciousness by capturing one village at a time. King Birendra deployed his jittery soldiers into the jungles of Nepal, many of whom defected to the Maoist camp. The king began to lose his grip on power. He even established a multi-party parliamentary system and granted more freedom to the press while he remained the head of state. But the palace was collapsing from within. In June 1, 2001, King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya's oldest son, Prince Dipendra appeared in the living room of the royal palace dressed in army fatigues. Armed with assault rifles and pistols, he massacred ten members of the royal family, including his parents and siblings. He then shot himself. The semiofficial explanation of his action stated that he was provoked by his parents' disapproval of his fiancée, but the truth will remain unknown. The young press unleashed itself with stories about the murderer prince and his addiction to hashish and movies of Arnold Schwarzenegger. People gossiped, argued over conspiracy theories, performed songs of mourning and celebration in the streets, even engaged in impromptu satirical street plays. Gossips and rumors held sway over Katmandu once again, but the tone wasn't hushed anymore.

The cultural shift in Nepal coincided with my own disillusionment with advertising, and in 2001 I left Bombay and returned to a different Nepal. The Maoists were on the cusp of becoming a legitimate political party. You could smell the hope for a new Nepal everywhere. In local buses, I traveled with some friends to the eastern parts of the country. We rode for days over treacherous hills to Rolpa, where the revolution had started. At every junction, the scene would appear normal at first: a municipal tap, men drinking tea, an old lady hunched over an antique sewing machine, naked children playing in the dust. But a closer look would reveal the patterns carefully etched by the lady on her treadle machine: red cloth with hammer and sickle, being readied to unfurl on bamboo sticks that dotted the hilly roads. This was a sort of spiritual awakening for me. It wasn't the political ideology per se, but the joy of participating in a historical moment. My urge to write stories about my country became stronger. The way Narayan wrote about Malgudi and Mistry about Bombay. But first I had to learn the craft. After two more years in advertising in Bahrain, I moved to America to join graduate programs in creative writing.

At the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, I learned to write by writing, and by reading books. I read for pleasure, but also more analytically, studying how writers use language, structure plot, describe characters. Though influences are ephemeral and hard to trace I became drawn to certain writers more than others. I admired Flannery O' Connor's ability to depict morally flawed characters with humor and deep empathy; Jamaica Kincaid's attention to the shape, design, and sound of a story; Isaac Babel's illumination of mood; Donald Barthelme's irony; Haruki Murakami's skill at marrying the real with the surreal; Chekhov's instinct to quietly defy narrative arcs; and Chinua Achebe's indigenization of the English language. At the

end of this essay, I will attempt to demonstrate how Chekhov and Achebe employ their techniques, and what I have learned from them.

Despite my attempts to read widely and indiscriminately, I've become more drawn to traditional short stories, aesthetically and for personal reasons. Like other short story writers, I like working within the limitations of space. The short form allows me to constantly practice the art of shaping character and conflict—early and clearly. Writer W.D. Wetherell says, “A story isn't about a moment in time. A story is about *the* moment in time.” I love the process of identifying *the* moment and making it significant to the story. Moreover, for many novelists, story writing is a rite of passage, which may well be the case for me. I do eventually want to write a novel, but first I'd like to be a good short story writer. My relationship with short stories could also be traced to my roots in Nepal. As I described earlier, we “talked story” to entertain and to inform, and people always opened their doors to good storytellers like Mitini Ama. The act of storytelling wasn't a deliberately subversive act during the reign of the monarchy. Mitini Ama, and others like her, retold stories about the king that she purportedly heard from her sources. Her act of retelling, then, became a strategy of holding the palace story captive, refashioning it for public consumption, and distributing it through the routes of gossip, which ultimately created a narrative about the king that may have triggered his downfall. I'm constantly inspired by that power of storytelling, and hope that I may also be able to write compelling stories that will change people's worldview, even on a miniscule fashion.

Of the few writers I mentioned above, Chekhov has been one of my biggest influences. Chekhov's minimalist aesthetic and its legacy have been well documented. The narrative tone in a Chekhov story is simultaneously compassionate and dispassionate. In his letters to Maxim Gorky, he spoke of the “necessity to write without judgment, as an unbiased observer.” Chekhov

wrote sparsely, in a slightly subdued voice. His stories don't really end—there's a closure, but no definite conclusion, leaving an impression of how vast human nature is. Even his dialogues get submerged in the white space because he felt that the “purpose of human exchange is to reveal as well as conceal.” What is perhaps lesser known is that he also defied the narrative rulebook through simple, effective experimentation. Novelist Francine Prose has done an elaborate analysis of Chekhov's techniques in her book *Reading Like a Writer*. I simply echo what she has already said. In Chekhov's story, “Volodya,” for instance, we never fully understand the character's motivation. Aristotle said, “the nature of a man's desire determines his morality,” which novelist Janet Burroway applies succinctly to fiction: “Desire + Danger = Drama.” In “Volodya,” the central character's undefined motivation is what ends up defining his character. Volodya commits suicide, but the reader is given no indication that he may have harbored such tendencies. He is a troubled teenager who has anxieties about exams and girls. Then he kills himself: “Volodya put the muzzle in his mouth again, pressed it with his teeth, and pressed something with his fingers. There was the sound of a shot. . . something hit Volodya in the back of his head. . . then everything was blurred and vanished.” The suicide comes as a shock, but far from leaving me (the reader) unsatisfied, the arbitrariness teaches me something larger about human nature: that people commit random acts of violence for no apparent reason. Within the context of how Chekhov sets up the story, revealing Volodya's daily anxieties bit by bit, the suicide ends up making perfect sense even though the desire remains unanswered. Similarly, in “Gusev,” Chekhov challenges a core principle of short stories: that the structure of a story rests on having it rendered through a singular point-of-view. In “Gusev,” the point-of-view shifts from a sailor to his friends, to a shark who comes to investigate the sailor's death, and then to an omniscient voice: “looking at this gorgeous enchanted sky, at first the ocean scowls, but soon it,

too, takes on tender, joyous, passionate colors for which it is hard to find a name in human speech.” Point-of-view establishes whose story it is. When the perspective shifts, the story becomes, to quote John Gardner, “a vivid and continuous dream.” We sink into the dream of the story while recognizing the moments when change happens. Change creates movement submerged beneath the mood of story. It is no longer only about the sailor, or why he died, but about a quest for the meaning of death. Chekhov creates an impressionistic story, a mediation on life one might associate more with the works of Borges. The shift in points-of-view works effectively to convey the story’s ambiguity.

Chekhov’s oeuvre is vast, ranging from his early situational comedies like “A Small Fry” to psychological meditations like “The Black Monk.” From plot-driven stories such as “The Bet” to impressionistic mood pieces like “Gusev,” Chekhov’s aesthetics range from realism to surrealism. Reading Chekhov is a constant reminder of the vast scope of possibilities that one story can hold.

At UH-Mānoa I discovered Chinua Achebe and learned to re-read South Asian and African writers in a new light. As a doctoral student, I’ve become more conscious of myself as someone who writes in English as a second language. My MFA experience helped me understand the technical aspects of storytelling, but I never consciously explored how my upbringing in Nepal, or my college years in India, may have shaped my aesthetics. Fascinated as I was to be a liberated writer, I aspired to cultivate a persona unanchored by the trappings of history. But my past always managed to sneak into my writing, in big or small ways. Even when I attempted to write about non-Nepali characters, the voice and personality embedded in my style wouldn’t let me forget my historical baggage. At Mānoa, I’ve learned to embrace that past while being open to new life experiences. Part of my education has been to recognize that language

cannot be meaningfully discussed outside the context of the social forces that have created it. Being better educated about the intersections between language and culture makes me a better writer. It may not help me imagine an intriguing plot, or write sharper endings, but it makes me more conscientious about the power of language. And that awareness is crucial for any writer, more so for someone who conveys in English the experiences of a non-English speaking milieu. Achebe is a master at conveying the richness of human experience through a non-native language. He is a writer whom I greatly admire.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents the Igbo experience from an Igbo point of view rather than from the detached perspective of a foreigner, or from the self-conscious narrative of an insider explaining his culture to outsiders. Narayan had said of the English language that it “needs to assimilate in the soil of India and grow from it.” Achebe domesticates the English language by transcreating local proverbs into English. But the proverbs aren’t used *only* as aesthetic embellishments. They are crucial to the narrative structure of the novel.

For many, *Things Fall Apart* is a novel about the disintegration of a traditional African community under the impact of European colonialism; however, the novel is also about the rise and fall of the central character, Okonkwo, against such a socio-political backdrop. It is that rise and fall which forms the narrative arc of the novel, and proverbs are the expressions that the narrator and the characters use to comment on the events as well as to express their opinions of the central character. Okonkwo is the greatest wrestler in Umuofia, a husband of three wives, father of eight children, and the owner of “two barns full of yams” and two titles. Early on in the novel, the narrator commends Okonkwo’s efforts in the words of the proverb, “if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonwo had clearly washed his hands so he ate with kings and elders.” This proverb is preceded by the maxim, “age was respected among his people, but

achievement was revered.” As the story of Okonkwo’s achievements unfolds, the narrator introduces the proverb, “a man who pays his respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness.”

Okonkwo is an honorable man who strives to maintain his dignity as a respectable member of the community: “Looking at a king’s mouth...one would think he never sucked at his mothers’ breast.” On the other hand, Okonkwo treats his family cruelly, and even offends his elders and gods. When Okonkwo violates the Week of Peace by beating one of his wives, he is admonished with a proverb which expresses the people’s disapproval: “They called him the little bird nza who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his chi.” Okonkwo responds with his own proverb: “The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger...a child’s fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into his palm.”

These proverbs play a pivotal role in conveying both the internal and external conflicts of Okonkwo, and therefore in charting the narrative arc of the novel. Interestingly enough, Okonkwo himself is not a great conversationalist. He quickly grows weary of feasting and talk, and longs to be out working in the fields, so when he uses proverbs, they acquire even greater significance. In Achebe’s hands, the proverbs perform multiple tasks: they create a narrative voice unique to the setting; they reflect the cultural fabric of the community; integrated into speech patterns they become interesting dialogues; they reveal character details; and they serve as social commentary when used as exposition—when the Europeans arrive, their language signals the end of a native tradition, of oral speech, and perhaps the end of a traditional Ibo community itself.

For Chinua Achebe, localizing the English language goes beyond the realms of aesthetics. Language embodies a civilization. Achebe has said, he uses language as a weapon “to

overthrow the imperialist perception of Africa” by using each word as a “spear of resistance.”

Ben Okri, R.K. Narayan, Buchi Emecheta, among others, have also treated the English language to convey the experiences of non-English speaking characters. What, then, are the social and political implications of writing in English as a second language? When do aesthetics become ideological? What kinds of responsibilities do these questions put on the non-native writer?

These are questions that I have come to think about a great deal, and I will explore them in my critical essay, “The Politics of Language Choice in Postcolonial Fiction.”

The trajectory of my life, I believe, has prepared me to become a writer. But the journey has just begun. Eudora Welty says, “A lifetime of learning isn’t steady. It’s a pulse.” I feel like I’m just developing the senses to feel the pulse.

## PINKY

I am my parents' only child. Ama became infertile after my birth. Endometriosis, the doctors said, and Ama and Buwa, unable to fathom the gravity of this, sought help elsewhere. In the narrow lanes of Kathmandu, they went to shamans, knocked on temple doors, consulted priests; they even went on long pilgrimages on foot, but nothing helped. Eventually, Buwa sought refuge in his transistor radio and Ama spent more and more time in the kitchen, pouring her sorrow over cauliflowers and cabbages that she shredded with her rusty knife. I was a quiet ten-year-old who listened to the silence from my room, surrounded by books and homework. One day, Buwa returned from work with a puppy. From the nylon bag that normally carried his lunch box and office files, the puppy poked its head out like a piece of vegetable.

“What is this nonsense?” Ama said.

Buwa grinned and carefully took the puppy out of the bag, placed it on the linoleum floor, and gently stroked its thick, black coat. The puppy, peacefully sleeping, looked like a fruit that had fallen off a tree.

“Will you tell me or not?” Ama asked, shaking her palm that was covered with flour from the dough she had been kneading.

“Found it behind the Nardevi temple. Not more than a few months old,” Buwa said.

“We can't have it in our house.”

Buwa put his finger on his lips. “We have milk?” he whispered.

Ama sighed and looked at me. I stood at the door, twisting my shirt, surprised, confused, delighted at this strange thing that had come from nowhere.

Ama had reasons to be upset. Very few people in our neighborhood kept pets. Those who went for walks with their German Shepherds or Labradors did not live near us, and their pets became the object of envy among people in our alley—shopkeepers and lower level government officers—who were struggling to put two meals on their plates. With so much struggle and uncertainty, our neighbors could not be bothered about a dog, much less show an appreciation for one. Buwa worked as a registrar for a wholesale distributor of Chinese products. Our walls weren't painted, and our most expensive possession was a 14-inch black-and-white TV, which we were content to admire like expensive furniture because it was switched off most of the time to save on energy.

“Look at it this way,” Buwa said, sitting in his chair, chewing supari after dinner. Ama was knitting a sweater and I sat on the floor, under a 40-watt bulb hanging by a wire, pretending to study, while my eyes kept straying to the cardboard box in the corner where the puppy lay sleeping.

“When it grows older, it'll protect us like a policeman,” Buwa said.

“What's there to protect? Even thieves have TVs these days,” Ama replied.

“But still, you see, it will keep those hawkers and vegetable sellers at bay and keep our neighborhood safe.”

We lived on the second floor of an old brick house with tiled roofs. Our house was joined with a row of similar houses that lined the narrow alley.

“Why should our dog guard the whole neighborhood?” Ama asked.

Buwa moved closer to her and stroked her long, black hair.

“Go and play,” he told me. I secretly smiled and went to my room. In rare, beautiful moments, Buwa and Ama bickered like an old couple but made up like little children, giggling and teasing each other. I could always hear them from my room, and when I was younger, I would bury my head in the pillow, confused and embarrassed by their squeaks and laughter. But that night I pressed my ear against the door. My parents’ giggles were interrupted by the puppy’s wailing. I slowly opened the door and peeked out. Buwa was convincing Ama to hold the puppy, which she did after some hesitation. The puppy snuggled into her arms and went back to sleep.

Within a week, the puppy became so familiar that it felt like we had had him forever. Every night he wailed, as if he were calling out to his mother.

“You two go to sleep, I’ll take care of this,” Ama would say to us, then boil milk in a steel tumbler and put it next to the cardboard box; the puppy would jump out of the box and finish off the milk until the tumbler rattled. Ama would then lay him down on a pillow and stroke him until he fell asleep. It was she who gave him the name Pinky.

“But Ama, he’s a male,” I said.

“So what? I like the name Pinky, and Pinky it will be.”

In no time, Pinky grew into a naughty Tibetan spaniel. In the tiny space of our living room, he jumped from chair to chair, chewed on rubber slippers, and barked at the TV when it was on. We fed him rice and milk twice a day and mutton-bone with rice every other weekend. To our calls of “PinkyPinkyPinkyPinky,” he ran around in circles, chasing his own tail. When Buwa returned from work he never forgot to bring something—hot pakodas or cream biscuits, which he dangled in the air tempting Pinky to jump higher and higher every day. If Pinky rolled in the dust making a thorough mess of himself, Ama and I bathed him with soap under a tap, brushed his coat, and checked the roots of his fur for lice.

≈

A few houses away from ours lived Tol-Ko-Muwa, a childless, eighty-year-old widow. No one in our area knew her real name. As long as I can remember, everyone called her Tol-Ko-Muwa, or Granny-of-the-Alley. She wore a faded cotton sari and a pair of old rubber shoes without strings. She had a slight limp and after every few steps she stopped to gather her breath, often resting her arm against the wall for support. Rumor had it, fifty years prior, her husband, a junior advocate at a district court, had coughed up blood one night and died. The last word he spoke was her name, and since then, she had protected her name like a souvenir that might be defiled if uttered by the rest of us.

Everyday Tol-Ko-Muwa went from house to house, talking about a time when her life was filled with color and joy. Out of sympathy, people's doors remained open for her, which gave her easy access into everyone's lives whose secrets she scattered sparingly, like throwing a handful of seeds to a flock of pigeons. She also had an uncanny ability for timing her visits—arriving at one house during lunch, landing at the other at teatime.

It was around three that Tol-Ko-Muwa usually came to our house, by which time I would have returned from school. Even as Ama went about doing her chores, Tol-Ko-Muwa would sit cross-legged in a corner and talk about this and that. While recounting her glorious past, her tone was nostalgic, and she placed her hand on her head, but when she gossiped about the neighbors, she was secretive, whispery, leaning closer and waving her wrist to emphasize a certain point. I could never tell if Ama paid her any attention, because sometimes Ama left the room and returned only after ten-fifteen minutes, but Tol-Ko-Muwa continued complaining and mumbling like nothing could interrupt her, until Ama placed a plate of roasted peas with a cup of tea in front of her.

“Was a time after marriage when we ate goat everyday,” Tol-Ko-Muwa would say, or she’d talk about the days when her feet touched nothing but high-heeled sandals that her husband bought for her from the fancy shops of New Road. “And these days? People can’t even afford rubber slippers. That Durga bahini’s slippers snapped the other day and she holds them together with a hairpin. Chee, how can people be so stingy? Her husband is a miser. No matter what appearance they put up, they mix water in their milk, I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

She never left without prophesizing happiness and prosperity exclusively for our family.

“What do you think she tells others about us?” I once asked Ama but she said such thoughts were not worth dwelling upon; they only brought more worries.

When Pinky arrived, Tol-Ko-Muwa was shocked. She tried talking Ama into getting rid of the dog. “Such filthy creatures don’t belong in a house,” she said. If Pinky ran to her wagging his tail, she climbed on a stool with a broom in hand.

“He is harmless, just trying to know you. Give him a pat and he’ll be happy,” Ama would say but Tol-Ko-Muwa would proudly turn her head away. As Pinky grew bigger, he had to be put on a leash when Tol-Ko-Muwa visited, and he let his displeasure be known. Chained to the landing of the staircase, he barked incessantly. When Tol-Ko-Muwa walked past him I had to stand guard and restrain Pinky. It wasn’t long before Tol-Ko-Muwa’s visits abruptly came to an end. Instead of explaining her discomfort to Ama, she talked to the neighbors. “I will not step into a house where dogs are given more respect than people,” she said. Ama chose to ignore her comments and said that after the dust settled, Tol-Ko-Muwa would find her way back to our house as if nothing had happened.

Our life had never been so exciting. My favorite time of the day was when Buwa returned from work and we took Pinky for a walk. As soon as we stepped out of our narrow alley on to

the main road, children would stop playing gully-football and come running to Pinky, offering him a biscuit, asking me what his name was. Even on a leash, Pinky greeted everyone: toothless porters or tired vendors, no one was spared a tail-wag. During the walks, Buwa too smiled more than ever, his skin no longer looked tired, and walking alongside Pinky, his own steps became bouncier, younger. The minute we re-entered our alley however, the neighbors whispered, “the barking prince” behind our backs.

Our three-room flat sat above a tea-and-snack shop. By daybreak, the shop would be crowded with noisy office-goers and our flat heavy with the smell of fried vegetables and pakodas rising from below. But Ama never complained. We neighbors shared a silent understanding that we were all equal, and could rise above daily hardships only with each other’s support. Choosing not to complain was Ama’s way of extending support to the shopkeepers, and they returned the favor by offering us free plates of pakodas every now and then. But the arrival of Pinky shook the delicate harmony. To the neighbors, it was as if we had bought a fancy car.

Then one day an unfortunate incident befell us. No sooner had I returned from school that afternoon, I decided to take Pinky out for a walk by myself, unmindful of Ama’s warnings to wait for Buwa. Perhaps my Math teacher’s “Very Good” at the bottom of my notebook earlier in the day had stirred my confidence. I hooked the leather strap to Pinky’s collar and off we went, running down the stairs, even as Ama beckoned at me from the kitchen.

Out in the alley, Pinky jumped and barked at the neighbors. I made sure to hold firmly to the strap and kept telling myself to be alert, but as we passed by the sweet shop, the fragrance of the freshly-cooked lalmohans captivated me. I stopped to savor the aroma of those perfectly-round sweets that Ramcha the sweet-maker arranged like a pyramid on the glass shelf. Pinky was pulling on the leash, perhaps restless to get to the main road, but the rich smell of lalmohan had

found me, and now it lingered under my nose. Ramcha was telling me to shoo the dog away, but I stood, unable to take my eyes off the liquid syrup dribbling down my most favorite food.

“Here, just for you,” Ramcha finally offered me a free lalmohan. “Now, take that dog away,” he said. As I hurried to claim my prize, Pinky snapped free from his leash.

“What have you done?” Ramcha yelled. The lalmohan dropped and splattered on the ground, its syrup trickling into a crack. Ramcha beat his forehead with his palm. “What kaliyug have you brought upon us?” he kept saying. Meanwhile, Pinky ran around the alley, causing a great pandemonium. People scampered and hid behind whatever they could find—garbage cans, electric poles—and some even went inside random shops. Pinky chased everyone, wagging his tail, barking.

“Don’t run. Don’t run. He doesn’t bite,” I said, trying to stop Pinky, when Tol-Ko-Muwa came around a corner, carrying a bowl of rice pudding. Pinky went after her. The bowl fell from her hands. She ran, tripped on a stone, and fell. After I grabbed Pinky’s collar, people rushed out of the shops and gathered around Tol-Ko-Muwa. They shouted at the top of their voices, each expertly dispersing his own theory of what should be done to cure Tol-Ko-Muwa’s sprained ankle. Pinky meanwhile barked even louder, confused and excited by what he had done.

By the time Buwa returned from work, a large crowd had gathered in our house. Ramcha, the sweet-maker; Hari, the shopkeeper; their wives; other neighbors—they were all there, sitting in a semicircle on the floor, surrounding Tol-Ko-Muwa, who sat in the middle with her head in her hands. The fall had strained her ankle and with everyone’s financial contribution, she had been taken to a clinic. Ama and I waited impatiently for Buwa. People sat murmuring among themselves, and every now and then someone got up and poked his head out of the door to take a look at the culprit who was chained to the staircase railing, barking to let him join the crowd.

“Today it was Tol-Ko-Muwa. Tomorrow it could be any of us,” the sweet-maker said as soon as Buwa entered. “Thank God, she was spared the dog’s bite. Imagine what would have happened then,” his wife added. Everyone murmured their assents while Tol-Ko-Muwa shifted her legs and let out a long sigh.

Buwa hung his bag on a nail behind the door and looked at Ama to indicate he would like some tea. Ama went to the kitchen and Buwa sat on a chair and fanned himself with his crumpled topi. For a while no one spoke and the sharp flame of the kerosene stove could be heard from the kitchen. Ama reappeared with a tray filled with glasses of tea for everyone.

“Listen bhai,” Ramcha said to father. “We all have been living together for ten-twelve years. This neighborhood, as you know, is based on mutual support. When you’re in need of money, I have helped you, have I not?” He paused here, letting the effect of the sentence settle around the room. Fresh murmurs arose. People looked at each other, then at Buwa. “Now, to let a dog come and endanger the neighborhood? If that is not sheer disrespect for our favors, I don’t know what is.”

Tol-Ko-Muwa complained that her ankle hurt like fifteen hammers were pounding on it. “I have stopped hoping too much,” she said, wiping her dry eyes with her sari.

“What happened today was regrettable,” Buwa finally spoke. “And I’m glad Pinky didn’t actually harm Tol-Ko-Muwa. That is what you all have not understood. Pat him once and he’ll feel happy and leave you alone.”

“Now, where do we have the time to pat dogs and show our affection? Really, bhai,” said Ramcha. “You expect me to ignore all my customers and wait for the dog to come wagging his tail, so I can love him? Clearly, you have let the dog rule your lives for too long.”

“No, let me finish. I guarantee nothing like this will happen again,” Buwa said.

Hari frowned and lit a half-stubbed cigarette which he had tucked behind his ear.

“We will keep Pinky indoor most of the time, and I’ll make sure my son is not careless anymore,” Buwa said. “You all can ignore Pinky and let us keep him. In my house I can do what I want.”

“So tomorrow I will turn my tea shop into a bar and have drunkards and prostitutes frolicking about until midnight. I can do it, it’s my shop! What do people have to say to that?” Hari said. He looked tense and the flesh on his forehead crumpled up.

There was a chorus of murmurs. Buwa threw his cap on the chair and went to his room, and one by one the people left, saying they hoped we would not let them down after all these years of living together.

Tol-Ko-Muwa stayed behind. After everyone left, she went to Ama’s side and offered her consolations, interspersing her words with sighs of pain. “It must be hard to live with the knowledge that you cannot bear another child, but do not demean yourself by letting a dog take your unborn child’s place.” She lowered her voice. “Pray. Pray. We will all pray for you,” she said, clasping Ama’s hands in hers.

That evening, due to a power outage in the area, we sat by a candle whose flame sputtered on the wick like a dying goat’s breathing. Still chained to the railing, Pinky had become sulky and quiet.

“We must pretend that he ran away somewhere,” Buwa said. “Dogs after all are dogs. We searched behind every temple, every shop, but he outsmarted us—simply went seeking a better life.”

Later we brought Pinky in. For a while he was grumpy, then he went back to his usual, bouncy self.

“We must take him back to the temple. What choice do we have?” Buwa said. “I’ll keep him in my room. I’ll be careful when I take him out. I promise. Please, Buwa,” I said.

Buwa looked away. “We must accept the truth,” he finally said.

I turned to Ama. She went to the kitchen and grated beetroot. Silence returned to our house like an old family member.

That night, I brought Pinky to my room. He wanted to play but all I did was cuddle him. I felt that I deserved punishment for my mistake. “You can break my leg, God, but let Pinky stay,” I said many times over. Pinky eventually fell asleep in my bed. I thought of running away with him. I knew a man who ran a stationary shop next to my school. He could give me a job and Pinky and I could rent a cheap place to live. I would leave a note to my parents and they could come and visit us. Thinking about the endless possibilities of a new life with Pinky made me tired, and I dozed off. I woke up at dawn to the soft knocks on my door. It was Buwa.

“Time to go,” he said.

Pinky jumped off the bed and went to the door. My mind was in a daze and it took me a while to remember what was happening. When realization hit me, I leapt out of the bed. Buwa knocked louder. Pinky barked and scratched the door with his paw.

As soon as I opened the door, Pinky went and wrapped his legs around Buwa’s. Then he ran to Ama’s room.

“We can still keep him. Please, Buwa,” I said.

“There’s nothing we can do.” Buwa tied Pinky to a leash.

I put on my jacket.

“You don’t have to come,” Buwa said.

I held Pinky's leash, and we walked out the door.

Ramcha was sweeping the stairs to his shop. Pinky wagged his tail, and the shopkeeper shared a joke with vegetable vendors who were sprinkling water on spinach and beetroots to make them shiny.

We walked quietly. Pinky, hopping alongside, kept sniffing the ground.

"I shouldn't have done it, Buwa," I said.

"That's okay," he said after a moment of silence.

"What will happen to Pinky?" I asked.

"I know a place behind the temple where we can tie him," Buwa said.

"And then?"

"Then a rich person will untie him and take him home. He will have a better life."

"I'm sure of that," he added after a while, and we turned the corner.

## HAIRCUT

It was quite early in the morning, but Krishna couldn't stop thinking about Iqbal, his barber. Though his wife was nagging him, he left the house and walked to the salon like there was no time to lose.

The barber was standing on the pavement, smoking tobacco leaf.

“Welcome hazur, welcome,” he said. He stubbed the bidi between his fingers and led Krishna through the curtain into the clean, brightly lit salon. Big mirrors lined the walls; next to each mirror was a poster of a Bollywood star.

Iqbal was from the southern plains of Nepal, a migrant in Kathmandu. He kept a carefully trimmed pencil-moustache, put a faint touch of kohl around his eyes, and combed back his sleek hair. The checkered cloth that he draped around his waist, with the crisp white shirt that hung on his dark skin, gave him the look of a character actor from a Hindi film. While he cut Krishna's hair, he was mostly silent, as if he secretly cried for chopping off hair that wasn't his, but when he spoke, he delivered words like musical notes—high-pitched for emphasis, and long elastic drones when he was particularly servile. Krishna often complimented him for his poetic voice and the answers never failed to impress:

“What can I do, hazur? My heart is filled with rice fields I have left behind. If my voice sounds lush and green, it is my heart that is talking,” and so on.

Krishna sat on his favorite chair, the one with a soft, red cushion seat. After the white cloth was draped around his shoulders and the string tied behind his back, he closed his eyes.

“You left your wife back in the village, no Iqbal?” Krishna asked, as strands of hair fell on the white cloth.

“My begum has laid her nest in my heart,” Iqbal said. “All I have to do is listen to my heartbeat. Like they say, hazur, our love is full of small gestures with grand meanings.”

After the haircut, the barber gently pressed Krishna’s temples and forehead; then, without asking, one by one, he undid Krishna’s top three buttons and let his fingers slide under the shirt. He kneaded the skin, massaging, pressing, working his way slowly to the curve of the shoulders. Krishna’s skin quivered at the touch, and in a voice barely audible, he said, “enough, enough.”

“As you wish,” the barber said and expertly cracked Krishna’s neck bones and held up a mirror behind him.

Krishna gave him seventy rupees—fifty for the haircut and massage, and twenty, an unusually big amount—as a tip. Outside, he walked, with a soft smile, and remembered to button his shirt as he passed by the sweet shop. The shopkeeper, wearing a dirty singlet, stirred a huge cauldron where the flower-pattern jeris swam in hot oil. The jeri’s sugary syrup trickled down your chin when you bit into it. “This time don’t forget to pick up sweets and vegetables on your way back. Please!” Krishna’s wife had said, but after the tip, he could barely afford any.

“Jeris?” his daughter asked as soon as he got home. She was lying in bed, listening to earphones and reading *Filmcity*.

“Later, okay?” Krishna said.

Nani rolled her eyes and blew a curl of hair that fell to her nose, like Katrina Kaif on the cover of the magazine.

In the kitchen, Krishna separated water from the rice. “That barber, Iqbal, I feel sad for him. Do you know he goes home only once a year to meet his family?” he said to his wife as the water drained in the sink.

“I’m making dal and spinach again. Nothing else.” Sabitri stirred the lentil and put a drop on her palm to taste the salt. “Go take your bath. I don’t want your hair messing up my kitchen.”

“Next time I won’t tip him so much,” Krishna said. “Don’t get angry.”

“Always one excuse or another,” Sabitri said and threw a bunch of spinach in the hot oil.

At work the next day, Krishna talked to a colleague about the blissful effects of a haircut and a shoulder massage.

The colleague looked up from behind a heap of files. “You only go for the shoulders?” He said. “I do the whole body and leg routine every month. Really, since I have been doing that, my life has changed, I tell you.”

“Is that so?”

“Call him at home. They come for a few extra rupees.”

A few days later, upon Krishna’s request, Iqbal came to his house, carrying a wooden box full of scissors, a small mirror, and an assortment of oils and powders. He offered his salaam to Krishna, squatted at the door, and lit his tendu leaf.

“Tell him he can’t smoke that thing here. Don’t know why you had to bring him home,” Sabitri muttered.

“Why don’t you make a cup of tea for him now, please.” Krishna nudged her, then led the barber to the veranda where he had spread a mattress. “I hope this is not inconvenient for you. We will skip the haircut today. But I want you to do a good massage on me. Let me also see what this ‘body massage’ is all about,” he said, trying a laugh.

Sabitri brought tea in china for Krishna, and in a steel tumbler for Iqbal. She put the barber's cup a few steps from him. After she left, Krishna offered his guest the china cup.

"Whatever you wish hazur," the barber replied, poured his tea in the saucer, blew on it and took a sip, making a long, slurpy sound.

"Take off your shirt, hazur," he said after finishing his tea.

For some reason, Krishna felt shy. He unbuttoned his shirt and put it on the side. To make up for his receding hairline, his chest was generously endowed with hair, which made him all the more self-conscious. Iqbal sat on his haunches, combing his pencil-moustache and stealing furtive glances at Krishna, his kohl glistening in the afternoon sun. After taking off the religious thread that hung on his shoulders, Krishna lay with his face down.

The drops of oil fell on his back, and slowly, the barber massaged him. How good it felt: the afternoon sun, the chirping of birds on nearby trees, the warm oil. Iqbal turned into a skillful masseur. He bunched his fists and ran them up and down Krishna's back, and along the way, quite playfully, squeezed the folds of his client's skin.

"What are you doing?" Krishna asked, giggling, but Iqbal only responded with his long fingers, now supple, massaging the curves, feeling out the shapes and contours of Krishna's body. Slowly the fingers reached down and pulled Krishna's cotton trousers just an inch below his waist, and poured teasing drops of oil on the tip of his bottoms.

"Enough," Krishna said, suddenly sitting up. The oil dripped like a tiny stream under his trousers. Krishna looked around to see if his wife or daughter were watching.

"Hazur, is anything the problem?" Iqbal asked.

"No, no."

"Should I be gentler?"

“No, that’s not it.”

“Your skin is so soft hazur. My bare hands sink into it so gracefully.”

Krishna smiled. He lay down again, this time with his face up and eyes closed.

The drops of oil trickled on his stomach, and the fingers moved slower, gentler. Krishna lay captive as Iqbal kneaded his skin as a snake charmer might play with a cobra: exciting it and taming it at the same time, and the long fingers stole away bits of shyness hiding in every pore of Krishna’s skin. Before he knew it, the middle-aged man was moaning. He opened his eyes, pushed Iqbal’s hands away, and sat up. His heart was knocking on his chest.

“Hazur?”

Krishna picked up his shirt and took out a crumpled fifty-rupee note.

“You can go now.” He nervously clutched the note in Iqbal’s palm.

“Will I have the service of attending to your hair soon?”

“We’ll see. You can go now,” Krishna said and left the verandah.

That night, in bed, he turned this way and that. Sabitri was softly snoring, her back to him.

≈

A year ago Krishna had won an office lottery, a free overnight stay for two at a hill resort, few hours from Kathmandu.

“Take the children, they will enjoy the scenery,” Sabitri had said. Nani responded with a “no way,” but Babu, their son, really wanted to go. “Father has never taken me anywhere,” he said. Then Nani started grumbling—if Babu was going, why couldn’t she go, too? They got into a fight with their mother; at the end they were packed off to the neighbor’s house for the night, and it was Krishna and his wife who took the long bus journey out to the hills. They had their

free meal in an empty restaurant, then sat looking out the window. Sabitri complained about how Krishna was not being the dominating father he needed to be. Nani showed no respect to her elders. Was that the way to groom a daughter?

“Why do you always see the negative?” Krishna said.

“Raising a daughter is not like drinking water. It requires thought, some control. She doesn’t listen to me because you don’t say a thing to her.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Be a father. Be a man. Daughters should be allotted a careful amount of love so they don’t feel deprived when they go to a new house.”

“What new house? She’s just a teenager.”

Sabitri sighed. “What is our room number?” She said.

In room 206, Krishna lay in bed, his arm over his head. Sabitri rested against the bed post, knitting a sweater. Just as she was measuring the length of the sweater on his arm, he turned, and started kissed her palm, her wrist, her elbow.

“Wait,” she said. The wool got entangled in his hand. She laughed. He pinched her. She gave him a mean look. He threw the half-knit sweater away, grabbed her, and kissed the neck.

“Slowly,” she said.

“It’s been so long.”

“Still.”

Afterward they lay side by side, staring at the ceiling. Sabitri hated the hotel pillows. They were too big, too soft. Why hadn’t they brought their own pillows from home? Why were they so poor at planning things?

“Let’s sleep,” Krishna said and turned around. Was a time when his wife’s eyes traveled so delicately over his body, when her fingers ran so playfully across his lips, when her voice on the phone left him with no choice but to sneak out of work and come running home. After the first child was born, she changed, and began a lifelong affair with unhappiness.

≈

A week after the massage, Iqbal’s touch rippled in Krishna’s body, all day long.

“What is the matter with you? Are you not feeling well?” his wife asked.

“I’m alright,” he said and looked away.

She was squatting, mopping the floor with a piece of rag. “You forgot to buy beetroot on your way from work. Go now, I have to cook soon,” she said, wiping the sweat off her forehead with her finger.

“When will a man have some peace?” Krishna grumbled on his way to the market, and after some thought, he dropped into see Iqbal, but the salon was closed. Krishna knocked. No response. He peeped through a little crack and knocked louder.

“Hazur.” Iqbal was on the other side of the road, watching. He walked toward Krishna with a smile and pushed the doors open

“Salaam, hazur, you haven’t paid me a visit in a while. Even my bare walls echo with your absence. See how they light up now,” Iqbal said and turned on the tube lights, which showered the salon with brightness. “You stopped the massage suddenly the other day. I hope it did not reflect my service. Were you unhappy, hazur?”

“No, no. Why would I be unhappy with you? In fact I was thinking maybe we could resume the massage. You see, I am having a little pain around my shoulders.”

“Shoulder massage, hazur?”

“We can do body, if you want.”

“What do *you* want?” Iqbal said.

“Okay, body. If you don’t mind.”

“How can I mind, hazur? Take off your shirt.”

“Here?” Krishna said. A boy was sweeping the floor. Krishna did not notice when this boy had come in.

The barber said something to the boy who threw away the broom, jiggled his hips, whistled a filmy tune, and ran out.

Krishna took off his shirt and Iqbal hung it on a peg.

“You enjoy doing this, Iqbal?” Krishna asked.

“Hazur, the art of massage has been passed down in my family from generations. It is said that my great-great grandfather was a private masseur to a very rich landlord in the village who had one masseur for his left arm, one for his right arm, one for the head, one for just the legs, and so on. When my ancestor placed his hand on the landlord’s arm, the great man cried with joy. All the other masseurs were immediately fired, and my great-great grandfather became the man’s designated, one and only,” Iqbal said. “I’ll make sure you’re comfortable.” He took out a round cushion from a drawer, and put it on the wooden panel. “Place your head here.”

Eyes closed, Krishna felt the same sensation again. It was as if the barber was inviting him into another world, a world with room for only the two of them. When the barber touched the small of his back, Krishna was breathing hard, as if snatching the last breaths of his life.

“Hazur?”

He was holding the barber’s hand.

“Don’t you wish to continue?” Iqbal asked.

“That’s enough.” Krishna quickly withdrew his hand. He put on his shirt, left every paisa he had on the counter, and walked out. If the barber was calling him, he did not hear.

He went straight to a temple and sat cross-legged, folding his palms and closing his eyes before Kali, the blue Goddess. The priest appeared from behind and dabbed red vermilion powder on the Goddess’s forehead. “Stepped inside for a change?” he said, but Krishna pretended not to hear him. When he reached home, he could not remember where he left the vegetable packet. Despite the children’s frantic protests at dinner, Sabitri only served rice and pickles.

That night, the table-fan rotated with a louder grunt as if it were making fun of him.

“Is something wrong?” Sabitri asked, her voice soaked with sleep.

“No, no. Go back to sleep,” Krishna said.

“You’re tossing and turning. Don’t think I don’t know what’s going on.”

“What?”

“You seem lost these days. Is something the matter?”

For a moment he wondered if he should tell her. That would ease his burden. Husbands and wives talked about such things, after all. “Nani’s future” he said.

She turned around. “What?”

“She does well in school. Why should we weigh her down with our doubts, our objections, our suspicions? Why?”

“What is the matter with you?”

He drew a long breath.

Sabitri placed a hand on his shoulder. “Sita didi saw her with a boy outside school the other day,” she said. “In five to six years, she will be married. What will people say if they see her roaming with boys? After all, we have a reputation to maintain.”

He kept quiet.

“Just remember that it only takes a whiff of scandal to crash everything. Don’t think people are blind, even walls can see.”

He did not respond, and after a while, she covered her head with the quilt.

He clutched the bed sheet with his clammy palms, struggling with all kinds of thoughts. What was happening to him? Where did this illness come from?

Next morning, Iqbal was cutting someone else’s hair, so Krishna had to wait on a bench. Iqbal told his customer a joke about the Mughal emperor Akbar and they both laughed heartily. Krishna looked away.

The haircut was followed by a head massage and the customer did not leave before showering his appreciation with a tidy tip. Iqbal bowed and offered his salaam to the customer. Then he dusted off the white cloth and greeted Krishna.

“Hazur, I’ve been thinking about you,” Iqbal said. “You left abruptly again. Seems like my service has not met your standards lately. You know hazur, a cook can prepare the best cuisine by sprinkling all the spices of nature, but if he forgets the salt, it is an insult to the guest’s taste buds. Perhaps, I might have unknowingly insulted the high standards I reserve for you. Allow me to be gentler this time.”

Krishna looked around. There was no one else in the salon. He kept his voice down. “Don’t think I don’t know your tricks,” he said.

“Hazur?”

“You manipulate your customers. After all these months, it took me one moment to realize what you’re up to. You make people take off their shirts and expose them to ways not proper in this town.”

The barber’s veins stood out on his forehead.

“Hazur?”

“This is all very filthy—you, you are filthy.”

“Sir, you’re insulting my trade,” Iqbal said.

“What right did you have to play with my body like that? Huh?”

Iqbal took a few steps forward, prompting Krishna to step out. On the pavement, loud enough for passers-by to hear, Iqbal shouted, “In all of history, fools have always mistaken art for trickery.”

Krishna hurried down the road. He was shaking.

“Listen!” it was Sabitri. She stood with a bag of vegetables in front of a stall. “Why are you walking so fast?” she said.

“Oh, you are here?”

“Where did you disappear all morning? My whole mood is spoiled. This vegetable market is a competition for cheats.”

“Let’s go home. I’m really tired.”

“We need squash. Come with me and carry the bags. What are you doing roaming around?”

“Nothing,” Krishna said and followed his wife to the vegetable market.

## GINGER TEA

As soon as Ma entered the crowded vegetable alley, she was greeted by a chorus of voices. “Didi, just for you. Over here, here.” The shopkeepers stood behind their stalls and tossed a handful of water on their vegetables. They clanked their weighing scales and shouted out their prices. Ma walked from stall to stall, making her way through the crowd, smelling a tomato here, feeling the firmness of an eggplant there. The dark glasses perched on her head with the Louis Vuitton dangling on her arm inspired the sellers to charge her three times the usual price, a gesture that flattered Ma. All she had to do was pick what she wanted and it was delivered to her Honda Civic, parked outside the narrow entrance of the alley, right by a shed of bricks and sacks. A policeman stood in the shade sucking on a mango pit. For a small amount he made sure no one went near Ma’s car.

As the sellers out-shouted each other for her attention, Ma walked with her chin raised, a hanky held to her nose. “Hajur, fresh onions, just for you. Come with me—this way, please.” A madhesi with paan-stained teeth grabbed Ma’s wrist with his bony fingers.

“What do you think you’re doing, Mister?” Ma said, her voice barely audible above the din of bargaining women. The man pulled her toward his onion basket which he had strapped to the carrier of his bicycle. “Help,” Ma screamed. A gash-lipped character pushed through the crowd and confronted the madhesi who finally let go of Ma’s hand. The two men argued over whose territory this was and then started kicking and hitting each other.

A crowd gathered to watch the spectacle. Ma stepped away and hurried along, mindful to raise her heels around muddy puddles. When she reached the car, her trembling finger pressed

the wrong key button, setting off the security alarm. The policeman poked his head out of the shed. Ma got into her car, threw a crumpled hundred-rupee note out the window, and sped away from the policeman who came out running for his tip.

Tempos, motorcycles, cars, taxis fought for space in the street, one-fourth of which had been dug up by the Kantipur municipality. The stink from the ditch gave Ma a migraine. She touched a pad on the dashboard which automatically rolled up the windows. The crisp air-conditioning calmed her nerves. This was the world she belonged in. Kathmandu was turning into a jungle—what else could one expect in a city taken over by savage villagers?

Ma was mulling over such issues when she saw *that* person's motorcycle, parked right in front of her gate. She honked until the gatekeeper came running and moved the motorcycle to a spot under a tree.

Ma ordered the gatekeeper to park and went straight to the kitchen for an aspirin. In the living room, her daughter sat on the couch, legs stretched out on the settee, talking to the person whose motorcycle was parked outside. Rajesh? Ramesh? The so-called drama actor. Ma couldn't stand the sight of him, his ponytail, his shabby kurta and jeans, and the unapologetic stench of cheap cigarette that lingered around him. As she fumbled in the kitchen cabinet for her aspirin, Ma could hear her daughter giggling and speaking in a low voice with that fellow. What would people say if they saw the daughter of Sunil Raj Joshi mingling with a third-rate drama actor, right under Ma's nose? One nasty remark was enough to cut the man down to size, but Ma restrained herself, fearful of Meena's reaction. On a whim, her daughter was capable of turning the whole world against her own mother.

"Geeta, my medicine," Ma called the maid and went to the verandah where she sat in an armchair under the awning. She rested her head in the groove of the chair. Geeta tore the

medicine wrapper. Without touching the tablet with her finger, the maid gently scraped the tablet out and let it drop on the tip of Ma's protruding tongue. Looking directly at the vine-beamed ceiling, Ma took a sip of water, then closed her eyes as Geeta gently massaged her temples.

"How long has that drama-baazi been here?"

The maid told her he'd drunk not one, not two, but three cups of coffee already.

"Do you know how much trouble I went through in the market?" Ma said. Before Geeta could respond, she added, "It is not my job to go to such filthy places. Why do you people make me do it? You go with the driver next time. You're twelve years old—it's time you did something worthwhile."

"But you told me I should never leave the house alone. And that driver? All day, sitting in the shade reading the cinema magazine. Even Bruno works harder with his useful barking," Geeta said, pressing the curve of Ma's eyebrows with her index fingers.

"Talk, talk talk, from morning to night—that's all you do. Go now."

Geeta asked if she wanted more water. Ma flicked her wrist in reply. After the maid left, Ma picked up the newspaper from the low table next to her chair. She skipped the political section and glanced at the horoscope on page three. "An upsetting dream may awaken you from a nap; avoid obstacles to your goal" was the prophecy for Karkat, her daughter's rashi. Ma was troubled by Meena's fitful behavior. The girl's older brother was studying law at Harvard, and Meena was expected to follow the family tradition in law, or get into a top MBA college in America, but ever since she passed her twelfth with distinction, Meena had been wasting her time writing poems and stories.

Meena *always* misused her freedom. The night before her final exam she'd come home past midnight, raksi on her breath, and offered no apology to Ma who had fallen asleep on the

sofa with her phone held to her chest. When she finally heard her daughter's scooter, Ma sat up on the sofa and turned on the T.V., pretending to be engrossed in a stale re-run of *Kyoki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*. While her daughter removed her shoes at the door, Ma watched her from the corner of her eyes. She knew Meena had taken alcohol from the way she left a shoe upturned.

“Don't you know that's bad omen? Such arrogance is not good,” Ma had said, for which she got nothing but a shrug. Ma would've preferred an argument instead of this silent dismissiveness. Her daughter walked past her, then turned back, and with raksi-smelling breath said, “I went out with some friends. It's called stress-buster. Besides, Buwa doesn't have a problem. He gets me...unlike you!” No further explanation was needed after this, which left Ma perplexed. She tipped the shoe over with her toe, irritated at Sunil who could fall into a deep slumber even while his daughter was out at night. He had a deep abiding trust in Meena, born of an intimate understanding that Ma felt excluded from.

≈

“Geeta,” Ma said. “Geeeeta.”

“Hajooooor.” The girl came running, wiping her wet hands with a mop tucked into the hem of her suruwal.

“Where is my tea?”

Geeta went back and returned minutes later with the tea tray which she placed on the side table. She put a spoon of sugar in the porcelain cup and stirred it carefully. Ma liked her tea piping hot so the maid had to first heat the empty cup in a microwave and then pour the steaming tea into it. If it wasn't up to measure, she made Geeta throw it out and make a fresh cup all over again. Sometimes this process went on for a few rounds until Ma felt the temperature just right to calm or complement her mood. It wasn't her intention to torture Geeta, as she'd sometimes admit

to the maid, but the chronic headache she was afflicted with meant that she had to be fussy about certain things.

“What are they up to now?” Ma asked.

“Meena Dijju looks at her laptop computer all the time,” Geeta said. “That man stares at the ceiling, then writes something down in his copy. I sometimes look at the ceiling, but I can’t see anything. I don’t know how such a crack person is Meena dijju’s friend.” Geeta also said that the man was developing a rich taste for coffee because he wanted it stirred specially with Splenda that Dada sent from America. “But I don’t like this Splenda-Flenda. I enjoy my tea with rich lumps of sugar,” she added.

“Come sit here beside me. You can do the dishes later.”

Geeta excused herself and returned, this time with a bucket of soap-water and a dry piece of cloth tied around her wrist. She crouched down and started wiping the flower pots placed along the trough of the verandah, beneath the iron balustrade. How cheerful these flowers were—marigolds, geraniums and roses. The geraniums were in full bloom at this time of the year when the air was crisp but not cold and the morning dew sparkled on every petal. The flowers and the tea allowed Ma’s thoughts to arrange themselves quietly.

She thought of calling up Bishnu-ji, the family accountant, to check the latest report on the stock index. Nepal Lever’s equity had shot up the day before and Ma sensed that it would rise still and she must buy some shares before the market fluctuated. Out of habit, she picked up the newspaper, turned to the financial page, folded it to the size of her palm, and combed through the numbers, but her mind was elsewhere this morning. Meena’s philandering kept nagging her. The deadline for applying to U.S. colleges was only a few months away, but the girl showed no sign of leaving her sofa. Ma decided to talk to Meena during lunch. She would confront the girl

if she must. How easy it was for Sunil to side with his daughter. He didn't have to deal with her silent arrogance. Around him Meena bloomed like a flower that had discovered a fresh breeze after stifling in the heat all day. She wrapped her arms around her father. They talked and laughed like it was their last conversation with each other. "You worry too much. Meena's brilliance will soon exceed our expectations," Sunil liked to say, but what if he had been miscalculating all along? The thought that her husband was too weak to tame his daughter quietly anguished Ma; worse still was her own fear of Meena whose arrogance Ma failed to tackle because Ma knew she wasn't confident and cunning like her daughter.

"Your mood is bad today?" Geeta's voice startled Ma. "Should I sing the Wheel powder song from the radio?"

"Sing. Entertain me," Ma said with a sigh.

The maid drummed her fingers on each pot, put her other hand up to her ear like she was holding a radio, and mimicked the morning broadcast: "This is Radio Nepal. It is 9:30 a.m. Time for some social messages." She sang jingles of detergent soaps in a shrill, high falsetto, prompting Ma to laugh and say, "Do the dance, do the monkey dance." The girl then squatted on the ground and beat an invisible bundle of clothes with an invisible stick, making a squelching sound from somewhere deep in her throat, and squatting still, she hopped from one spot to another, singing,

*"Ho you mero prana bhanda pyaro, Maitighar, Maitighar, Maitighar. Wheel sabun cha kasto saro, Maitighar, Maitighar, Maitighar."*

This made Ma laugh so hard tears rolled down her cheeks. Geeta hopped and sang more frantically, and then bumped into a Chinese vase that sat atop a mahogany stand. The expensive vase toppled and shattered to pieces, each tiny shard sparkling like ruby on the marble floor.

The crash left a lingering silence. Bruno barked in the courtyard. Ma rose from her chair, walked steadily toward the culprit. With both hands, she snatched Geeta's hair. After counting five, she pulled the hair apart until the scalp almost tore open. Then she pushed the maid, who fell on the shards. A streak of blood trickled from underneath Geeta's palm, whose sight made her cry like her mother had just died.

The thud of footsteps could be heard immediately. Meena arrived with the predictable look of shock. The drama actor followed with deliberate quietness. Meena helped the maid up. She poked Geeta's palm with her finger. "It's a deep cut. Go wash your hands. I'll put bandage," she said. The maid wouldn't stop sobbing. "No need for this overacting. I'll take care of you," Ma said with a raised voice and Geeta scurried away to her one-room quarter in the courtyard.

The weight in the air hung oppressively between Ma and her daughter.

The drama specialist bent to examine the blood on the floor. Turning to Ma, he said, "How did she *fall*, aunty?"

"Rajesh," Meena said, too late.

His feet were large and ugly. First-class officers and doctors had to wait for a formal invitation to this house, Ma thought, and here was this filthy character, relaxing on their sofa for hours every day.

"Who are you?" she asked, unable to mask her disgust.

"Sorry?"

"Rajesh, please leave," Meena interjected.

He refused to move. An ivory pendant dangled from his chain.

"Don't you have any work?" Ma said.

He fiddled with the sharp pendant.

“At least have some dignity.”

“Mami, please—”

“Why are you after my daughter? She has work to do. She cannot hang around with cheap goondas like you all day.”

“Goonda? Meena volunteered to work with our troupe. Didn’t you, Meena?”

“Rajesh, please go,” Meena said.

He did not budge.

“Get out of my house,” Ma said. “I can phone the I.G.P. right now.”

“You think you can just humiliate me?” He rolled up the frayed cuff of his kurta.

“Geeta, call the guard,” Ma said aloud.

“Poor Geeta has other things to think about,” Rajesh said. His eyes sought Meena’s but she turned away. The man stood like he didn’t know what to do. The mustard oil in his hair gave off a repulsive odor. He scratched his chin with his pendant and threw a quick glance at Meena, who stood still, arms crossed. Then he left with a “sorry hai?” aimed at her.

Bruno barked at him in the courtyard.

Meena spoke, her voice strained: “You think you are a queen to order things around?”

Ma instinctively reached out to touch her daughter, but Meena flinched.

“We need to talk,” Ma said. “These artists and actor types—you don’t know them; they’re inspired by poverty. He’ll trap you with his dramatic words.”

“Will you please, please stop stifling me? We’re writing a script for a three-act play.”

“What about your application? All day sitting on the sofa with this fellow. What will people say?”

“Which people are you talking about? Why should they care about what I do? And I like sitting on the sofa with him. We’re *making* art.”

“Bishnu-ji saw you with this person in New Road. In a restaurant. Drinking Fanta together.”

“So Bishnu-ji is your new spy?”

“You are Sunil Raj Joshi’s daughter.”

“What did *you* do to Geeta?” Meena asked, looking directly into Ma’s eyes.

“Don’t change the topic.”

“Tell Bishnu-ji to concentrate on his accounting. Or, I’ll be the one to fire him.”

“Listen to how she talks to her own mother! And stop pretending you care about the maid.”

“I didn’t drag her like a slave from the village. I don’t want to spend all day teaching her to gossip or form a fake relationship with her. It’s called defying the master morality. Unlike you, I’ve read Nietzsche.”

“Where is your niche-fiche when you need the maid to serve you coffee, to make your bed? Save your lecture for America. It doesn’t work here.”

“You’re an embarrassment,” Meena said. She kept her eyes fixed on her mother. Ma lowered her eyes. The screen-door slammed on Meena’s way out.

Unable to bear her own weight, Ma sat down on the chair. She formed the end of her sari into a knot, loosening and tightening it while she tried to console herself that the fault wasn’t necessarily hers. A slap here and there put the maid in her place. Geeta’s carelessness was an insult to the privilege given to her. The shelter, the food. Such luxuries came with a price, especially since Ma wasn’t the type to discriminate in matters of food. The maid ate the same

quality basmati rice that the rest of the family did, enjoyed chicken prepared in the same sunflower oil instead of the cheap banaspati ghee. The mound of rice on Geeta's plate at every meal was her token of appreciation, which needed to be tempered with a slap every now and then. But Ma regretted her action all the same. Only the passage of time would cajole the maid into singing and dancing again. It might be a whole week before Geeta would be herself around Ma. Without Geeta's easy companionship Ma felt uneasy, troubled. She wasn't free around her own daughter. They didn't laugh together the way Ma and Geeta did; they didn't spend whole afternoons gossiping about the driver's three wives or the milkman's drug-addicted son, details of which Geeta poached and delivered with great efficiency so Ma could keep an eye out for any suspicious movement. The thought that she'd have to endure a whole week without Geeta's chitter-chatter made Ma unhappy. If only she could call the maid for a cup of tea—

A fresh headache crept up her scalp and threatened to poison the remainder of Ma's day. She treated herself to another dose of aspirin. After the dull pounding of her temples dissipated, Ma picked up a broom and swept away the shards on the floor. Sunil would be upset if he found out, though he had no real experience dealing with the maid. Geeta tiptoed on the periphery of his existence, serving his bedside tea every morning with her well-rehearsed "Thulo Hajur, Tea" which Sunil acknowledged with a "huncha ba" while his face remained buried under the quilt.

Meena was no less dismissive of the maid. Her hi-fi theory about equality was a way of proving that she was modern. Why, Ma witnessed Meena's proudy behavior every week when the maid cleaned her room. Ma would stand behind the fish tank in the hallway and watch Geeta clean the bookrack with a dry piece of cloth, running her fingers over each spine. She'd then scrub the antique Buddha statue and wipe the framed picture of Meena eating a McDonald's hamburger at the Singapore airport. The maid would hold this picture close to her heart and wipe

it carefully, cleaning every cut of the carved wooden frame. If Meena made an unsuspecting entry, Geeta's fingers would dart back to Buddha's statue for another frantic scrubbing. Ma would watch, taking note of Meena's condescending treatment. The girl would first let the maid clean her room thoroughly while she sat on a chair reading a book. After the carpet was vacuumed and the bed sheet changed, Meena would say "thank you so much hai, Geeta?" and let the maid sit on her chair instead of the floor. "Geeta, this is not your fate, education is your fate. You should demand equality. Demand what?" Meena would say.

"Quality."

"Louder. Raise your arms and say it."

"Quality," Geeta would respond, and run out of the room, embarrassed. Meena would then stand at the door, arms crossed, while Ma pretended to fiddle with a pipe in the tank.

When Ma heard Sunil's car outside the gate, she tied her hair into a bun and straightened the crease of her sari. Meena was leaning against the wall, staring at her.

"Good job destroying the evidence, but your servant needs tetanus shots as soon as possible. Her hands are bleeding."

"Don't start with me again."

Meena shrugged her shoulders. "In that case I have news for my father."

"We'll see who has news for whom. Your cheap philandering with street-types will be news to him."

"Oh, yes, I forgot about that. By the way, Buwa has read Rajesh's articles in the newspaper. Buwa actually reads the newspaper, not just horoscopes."

"That is too much!"

Meena kept her eyes fixed on her mother, refusing to drop her glance even when Sunil beckoned to them from downstairs.

Before Meena could detect the smallest sign of trembling in her mother's face, Ma walked away.

Sunil was on the phone as Ma entered the living room. When he saw her he bunched his fingers towards his mouth signaling he was hungry. The maid had prepared absolutely nothing. From the fridge Ma took out the previous night's dal, chicken curry, and aloo gobi. Several minutes were spent finding the cilantro that the maid had stuffed in the lowest compartment of the fridge despite Ma's repeated insistence that she hated to have to stoop and rummage for food. Another few minutes were wasted locating the methi seeds that the maid had hidden in an overhead cabinet so that Ma would have to stand on her toes and stretch her arm all the way back.

Both Meena and her father liked their food freshly cooked, but it wasn't Ma's fault that she was forced into everything from shopping to cooking in this house. Her mood soured at the thought of the never-ending list of chores thrust upon her. Still, she managed a smile and fried the methi in a cauldron of hot oil, then poured the dal into it, making the lentil give off a *jhwaaiiah* sound. In it went a handful of chopped cilantro for garnish, and another handful into the slow-burning chicken. Wistfully humming the Rajesh Khanna classic, *Mere Sapano Ki Rani Kab Ayegi Tu*, Ma wiped the glass plates with the kitchen towel. She could feel his presence then. Sunil stood behind running his finger tip along the curve of her neck.

“What are you doing?” she said with a giggle.

“I used to sing this song to you in our honeymoon days, remember?”

Ma blushed. She turned around to face her husband. Looking at his eyes, she said, “Does anyone care about me?”

“What happened? Where’s the maid?”

“Sick,” she said. She played with the button of his shirt. “I’ve been doing all the work since morning. We need another help in the kitchen—I can’t take this anymore.”

“If you want I’ll send someone from the office. Keep him for a few days.”

“It’s okay. I’ll handle it anyhow.” She looked into his eyes. “But you do care about me, don’t you? You do appreciate how well I’m managing this house?”

“What’s the matter today? Looks like the news from the stock market has flustered you. I heard Nabil Bank’s shares dropped like a dead bird.”

“I want you to be mindful of my concerns, that’s all.”

“Daddy—” Meena called from the living room.

Ma wrapped her arm around Sunil’s waist.

“Dad, I need to talk to you about something.”

Ma pulled him closer. “Don’t leave me,” she said.

“What is this nonsense?”

“She started it.”

“You’re her mother. Act your age.”

This really hurt Ma. She released him from her grip.

He rubbed his eye with the heel of his palm. Meena appeared at the door. “Daddy, something urgent needs your attention.”

“I’m not a free man in this house,” Sunil said aloud. He dismally looked at his wife and caressed her hair, but she turned her face away. “Yes, darling,” he said and followed his daughter.

Ma carried the dishes and set them on the dining table. Daughter and father took their rightful seats, engrossed in a discussion about labor law, peppering their conference with “prabandhak” and “under section 3” and “power to maintain reserve,” and “retrenchment and redistribution”—meant to push Ma farther and farther away. Ma stood next to her husband and served him the chicken curry, pouring a ladle-full over the steaming rice, but he craned his neck as if he wasn’t going to let a single flaw in his daughter’s speech go unnoticed.

“The beet pickle has been drying in the sun all morning. You want me to get some for you?” Ma asked him, but all she got was a polite, “not now.” Talking still, Meena went to the kitchen and brought her own plate, ignoring the one her mother had put in front of her.

“Not joining us?” Sunil turned around to ask his wife who was now hovering behind his chair.

“I’m not hungry,” she said.

He glanced at his daughter. “What happened to the maid, anyway?” He asked. Meena cleared her throat. “Remind me to talk to you about something,” she said. Ma clutched the end of her sari, her posture erect.

“Easy to manage this one,” Sunil said. “The driver can take her to the doctor if she’s not feeling well.”

“What about sending her to school, Daddy?” Meena said, fingering the rice and dal into a ball. “By the way, is this last night’s food?”

“The maid is sick. Don’t blame your mother,” Sunil said.

Meena shook her head. “Anyway, don’t evade the topic, daddy. Let’s hear your argument.”

“Oh, education. Yes, she’s too young for that. These servants are made differently. Education can go straight to their head at this age.”

Meena threw her arms in the air, a routine gesture at the dining table. “Such a hypocritical snob. You’re a cold-hearted elitist, daddy-hajur.”

“Okay.” He nodded slowly. Swirling his finger in the dal bowl, he looked at her and said, “Where’s your admissible evidence?”

She pointed her curry-stained finger at him: “I quote Churchill: ‘the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.’ You, your honor, are essentially the same breed. ”

“Ad Hominem!”

“Hear me out, first!”

“Proceed.”

“Dialectic materialism, as Hegel said, ultimately is a source of systemic decay.”

“Academic mumbo jumbo, my dear, is not corroborative evidence, simply a matter of hearsay.”

“I object!”

“Objection overruled.”

“Dhyaaaa, listen to me, pleeease!!” Meena was not interested in her food anymore. She pushed her plate away, repeating, “Please ke? Pleeease ke?” with an exaggerated gesture of her hands.

Father and daughter's eyes were now locked. Soon Meena would start banging her fists on the table and scream out words like labor dispute and welfare arrangement. Her father would laugh, challenging her to replace her fists with the gavel, unmindful of the streak of gravy trickling down the edge of his lips to dissolve in his fleshy double-chin. Done with lunch, they would move to the living room where they'd indulge in more arguments. Then Sunil would stretch back on the sofa for a power nap before returning to work at exactly 12:55 p.m., leaving his daughter pining for his return at night to satiate each other's hunger for that one last heated clash of words and ideas, all of which would leave Sunil too exhausted to spend time with his own wife.

Ma stood at the kitchen door and watched them. A squirt of acidic bile slowly rose from her gut. She drank a glass of ice-cold water and considered what she should do next. She had the whole day ahead of her.

She phoned the family priest.

"Meena nani has such a bad temper, oh ho," the priest said. "No respect for our traditions. As they say hajur, greedy for mutton, old woman drowned in the soup. Now at this frail age, I have to think ten times before attempting to perform puja on Meena nani. Too much to ask from this old man whose bones are rattling like cycle parts."

"I don't need your sympathy today," Ma replied. "You must come this evening with her birth chart. I sense bad omen."

"Of course, I will come. If you say so, I will be there right away. I was about to have my afternoon nap, but such luxuries my rattling bones can do without. Meena nani's lakhbatti puja has to be performed so she gets the visa for America. I will make all the arrangements for this

puja. One more puja two days before she sits on the airplane. That is for good luck and good health.”

“No need to overdo it. She’ll make you suffer for the rest of your life. One simple lakhbatti puja will be enough.”

“Why not, why not? I’ll be right there to go over her birth chart. I can arrange for one puja this week. You need not worry one bit. I’ll make the arrangements. If all goes well, who knows, Meena nani might be kind-hearted to send this old pujari a plane ticket. I have served your family for generations. Before they throw my bones in the fire, my last wish is to see America, especially Nebraska, where my neighbor’s son has bought the latest model car, I hear....”

Ma was listening with the mobile tucked between her ear and shoulder. Standing over the sink, she picked at threads of cilantro that clung to the knife. She closed her eyes as the priest’s voice drifted away. She felt as if something inside her had wrapped up into a tight knot. She tossed the phone on to the kitchen counter and made her way to Geeta’s quarter.

“Geeta, Geeta,” she said, standing outside the one-room house.

There was no response.

“This is Ma Hajur, come out right now.”

Bruno whined from his cage, reluctantly wagging his tail. But there was no sign of the maid. Ma walked towards the door, a rough plank of wood without a knob. It opened with a creak. The room was about the size of Ma’s bathroom. In a corner she saw discarded taps, pipes, and a rusty power generator. A nylon rope nailed on opposite corners hung across the room from which dangled a few scraps of clothes, giving the place a dank odor. Geeta lay on her string bed, looking at a *Tin Tin* comic book, her hands puffed up, blood-stained.

“Meena didn’t put bandage?”

“She forgot.”

“I told you.”

Geeta didn’t respond.

“Why are you pretending? You don’t know how to read,” Ma said.

“I like the pictures,” the maid replied without looking at her.

“Make me some ginger tea. My headache is killing me.”

“Who will take me to the doctor?”

“Is this the way to talk back to Ma Hajur?”

“Your mouth will itch if you drink tea made with my rotting hands.”

“Chee, such a black tongue you have.”

“Then take me to a doctor.”

“Good idea. I hope he will cure that black tongue of yours.”

Geeta poked her head out of the comic book. “Me too,” she said.

“Any other service?”

Geeta weighed her option. “If you hit me again, I will run away from this house, then you will be all alone,” she said.

Ma did not speak for a while.

“I also want to taste a hyamborger,” the maid whispered.

“The gall of this servant,” Ma finally said, then added, “Wear something nice. I’ll wait in the car.”

## THE SMUGGLER

Midnight. A quiet stretch of road. The smuggler rushes out of the darkness from the Indian border into Nepal. He drives a Maruti van, white, with red fluorescent lights dancing above the headlights. Once again, he'd managed to sneak past the Indian checkpoint without overpaying the cops, but instead of feeling a sense of relief, his skin crawls at the thought of what might lay ahead on this dark, desolate road.

The van is old and battered, with a broken dashboard and cigarette butts all over the floor. In the back, five bags of hashish and a few AK-47s, carefully hidden underneath a mattress. With one eye on the road, the smuggler reaches for a half-finished bottle of Bagpiper, rips open the cap with his teeth, and lets the alcohol tear into him.

It is a sweaty, humid night. Patches of tar that had burst open in the afternoon heat lay exposed like wounds on this narrow road. The smuggler looks at the pistol lying on the empty seat, hoping he wouldn't have to use it.

His belly hangs like a sack. He rubs it, unearthing threads of muck, which he rolls into little balls and flings out the window. Around three he'll reach Mugling where Gori will be waiting for him in a room behind a roadside restaurant. Gori, with mounds of flesh peeking out of her blouse, and the ridge between her breasts powdered white. The smuggler strokes his crotch with the bottle and grins, trying to get his mind off the long drive ahead.

The smuggler can't shake off the feeling that someone somewhere is waiting to ambush him. It's not the cops he's afraid of. They're like prostitutes whose favors are always available

for a sum. But the Maoists are something else—bloodthirsty peasants who've infested these hills like a disease, brandishing their homemade weapons, threatening to slay everyone who reeks of big city wealth. The smuggler is proud to be a city man. With his hands on the steering wheel, he angles his face to kiss the golden chain around his neck. He can sense them lurking behind trees, waiting to rob him naked and slit his throat with a rusty *khukhuri*. The duller the blade, the more agonizing the death.

For a moment the smuggler wonders how he might die. Like a goat suffering a slow, agonizing death, bleating even as its tendrils hang from its throat. The smuggler wonders if his eyes will roll the same way as the goat's; if his blood, black as tar, will trickle down and seep into his killer's fingernails.

He takes another swig, jabbing the pedal harder.

Gori. Ha! When he'd first spotted her, she was standing outside a roadside restaurant, waiting for a customer with a steamy plate of rice. The way she looked at him, with her tiny eyes, rimmed with *gajal*, applied so skillfully, stroke by stroke, just to captivate him and make him her prisoner. Next time they met, he'd bribed the fat lady in the restaurant and taken Gori to a *mela*. How amused she'd been by the spinning wheels. She laughed, she danced, she teased him. She even forced him to take a picture with her, like a married couple, in a tiny photographer's booth, against a backdrop of the painted fish-tail mountain. He had said no. He wasn't the one to take pictures with women, but her sexy-angry look had captivated him.

With an eye on the road, the smuggler takes out the picture from his wallet and sticks it on a crack on the steering wheel. He's been away for three months. Tonight, he'll peel off her sari, layer by layer and sleep in her arms. The smuggler tips the bottle all the way down until the last drop stings his heart. He then flings the bottle out the window into the deep forest.

Only a year ago, this very stretch of road had been normal. He would wave at women scrubbing children at municipal taps; smile at farmers squatting on roadside boulders; honk at busy market settlements where bus passengers crowded outside restaurants, smoking after stuffing themselves with rice and chicken, or munching on spicy peanuts that the madhise sold in coned newspapers; and he'd drive alongside trucks and buses onward to Kathmandu on the long highway that wound through the hills. He also stopped by a teashop for a smoke and a chat. This mud house with a thatch roof belongs to an old woman who'd sit in front of an open fire and brew the sweetest milk tea. She talked a lot and when she smiled her eyes got lost in her wrinkles. Then things started to change. The smuggler knew there was trouble when young boys and girls with rusty rifles and bandana-covered faces appeared on those boulders. Those kids walked quietly up those hills in small groups as if they were onto a deadly secret. They dug up poles with red flags everywhere, including in the little patch outside the old woman's teashop: a pair of bamboo sticks, wrapped in red cloth, painted with a hammer and a sickle. When the smuggler went in a few months ago, a group of young men were drinking tea, wearing ill-fitting army fatigues; faces covered with bandanas. They looked at him from over the brims of their cups, suspicious. Even the old woman did not talk; she served tea and went about her business quietly. Something has changed and for the first time the smuggler feels threatened. In his own country.

"Fucking Maoists," the smuggler shouts out the window. He wonders if Gori is a secret Maoist. There's something about her that's strange. She does things that whores don't do, like sewing a button on his shirt, or sitting with him and watching him eat, massaging his tired legs afterward. He'd found it amusing in the beginning.

“What is this drama? Stop acting like a wife; you’ll never be one,” he had said and pinched her arm.

“Am I not your wife already?” she had said, pinching him right back.

Gori didn’t even put on makeup like others, only gajal. For a whore, she was a deep thinker, and what she thought of the smuggler could never guess. Sometimes he’d wake up from a long nap and find her looking at him. Sitting on a chair and just staring. He wished he could slice up that head of hers and see what was breeding in there. She’d stroke the curls on his chest and say she wanted a new life. She asked him to take her to the city; asked him how big his house was. The last time they were together—everything was going well. She danced facing the mirror, her back to him. Suddenly she turned and wrapped the end of her sari around his neck, almost coking him to death.

“Marry me,” she said, her eyes red, bulging. “Take me away from here.”

He had to slap her to bring her to her senses. She stood in a corner, and with one palm covering her cheek, stared at him like only a peasant would. Eyes glowing like burning coals. Truth was, she’d frightened him. Only when she started crying, did he let her sleep next to him.

The smuggler takes a cigarette from behind his ear and lights it. How proud he is to be a Kathmandu man, far removed from the worries of these villagers. It was probably the “jungle gods” playing havoc with their minds. With one hand on the wheel, the smuggler pulls out a fresh bottle of Bagpiper from underneath the seat. He chugs down more whiskey. How backward these bastards really are. They shape figures of the jungle-god out of dough, stick the dough on stones, and offer prayers to these damn pieces of dough, chanting mantras in languages no one else understands. The smuggler clenches his fist and stabs his chest because he’s laughing so hard. To take his mind off, he picks out a cassette from the dashboard and slides it in the player.

The screeching tape ruins Michael's voice. The smuggler doesn't understand a word Michael sings. He swings his shoulder to the Disco music. *I'm Bad. I'm Bad.* The smuggler understands that much. *I'm Bad.* "I'm a man from the city!" he shouts.

On a bend, the smuggler stops the van. He gets out to pee. He's more drunk than he thought. That's the thing about drinking: as long as you keep driving, you're fine. The minute you step out, the world starts spinning. Standing on the edge of a deep gorge, the smuggler relieves himself. Below, the *Karnali* river, so quite in the day, roars like a demon at night. In the darkness, there's not a sound except the snarl of the river. The smuggler pisses a high arc hoping it lands on a peasant's head and brings the bastard to his senses.

At three the smuggler reaches Mugling. The place is so quiet he shuts the ignition and parks on the side of the road. From under his seat, he takes out a bag of oranges he'd bought for her. The restaurant is closed. No dim bulbs hanging from cracked ceilings. No big breasted women standing outside the doors calling out to travel-weary passengers. A stray dog sifting through garbage barks at him.

The smuggler washes his hands and face at a public tap and walks through the narrow alley to Gori's room. He gives the wooden door a push. It opens with a creak. The room is dark except for a weak oil lamp burning on a table, its shadowy smoke curling up the wall.

"Who is it?" a woman says with a startle. She's lying in bed. "Go, go, away; there's no one here."

"Who is this?"

"Who are you? Go away!"

"Where's Gori?"

The woman holds the lamp to the smuggler's face.

“You?” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“Where is she?” He leans closer. It’s the restaurant owner. She looks older and there’s a peculiar smell about her. “Who took her?” he asks.

“She’s gone.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I can’t offer you any food now. Go, just go. If they find you, they’ll kill you. And me.”

The smuggler looks around. There are pots and pans and a stove. A limp stray dog that always sat outside her restaurant is lying on the bed. It looks dead.

“You fucking bitch. What did you do to her?” he says.

The old witch grabs an axe from somewhere. “If you don’t get out, I’ll chop your head off,” she says. She gets off the bed.

“Hey, you, crazy woman. What are you doing? I only came to meet her.” The smuggler takes a step back.

“Get out.”

“Where did they take her?” he asks, a foot outside the door.

“Her naked body might be lying in a ditch somewhere, or she might be holding her gun high like everyone else. Now will you go or should I make you go?”

The smuggler slams the door and staggers back.

He sits motionless in the van. “Gori,” he whispers. He starts the ignition and kicks into gear. Maybe if he drives fast enough he might find her and prevent something awful from happening. He would kill all those bastards. Maybe he should stop the van and walk up the dark hills, slay every tree, burn every house until he finds where they kept her. But where? Where should he go?

The smuggler keeps driving. Even as his mind blurs he sees a faint light in the distance. He drives on, peering ahead. There are two men, one with a rifle slung on his shoulder; the other is squatting on the road. The man with the rifle takes a few quick steps toward the van, aiming the weapon at the smuggler. The road is too narrow to make a quick U-turn. The smuggler slows down. His left hand reaches for the gun. The men don't look like Maoists; they're in blue police uniforms, and as the van draws closer, the smuggler notices a square shed of bricks and sacks. It is a police sentry. The smuggler sighs with relief and stops the vehicle but keeps the lights on.

The one with the rifle comes to the window and flashes torchlight in the smuggler's face. He is sucking on a mango pit. He scrapes the pit clean, tosses it away then wipes his fingers on his jacket.

"Where to?" he says. He has a very young face.

"Kathmandu," the smuggler says, offering a friendly salaam. "Nice cool, evening."

The other man, who's sitting on the road, walks slowly toward them. His boots crush the crunchy tarmac. He stands in front of the van. He wears a police cap, his face covered with a scarf. There's something odd about him. The jacket is too big. He points a pistol at the smuggler, but his arms aren't steady.

"What's in it? Money? What's in it?" The man with the torchlight says. He kicks the side of the van.

"Nothing, it's empty."

"Get out."

The smuggler slides his own gun in his trouser pocket and steps out.

"Open the door. Let's see what you have," the man—a boy, really—says. He smells of sleep but his eyes are alert.

“Look, bhai, why don’t we talk? We can settle this,” the smuggler says forcing a smile. Then he notices a scarf tied around the boy’s neck. A white sickle shines against the red cloth.

The smuggler’s throat is parched. “I’m not the one you’re looking for,” he says.

The boy grins. “Open the trunk,” he says.

The other one is standing, aiming at him from the same position.

The smuggler hesitates. “It’s just mattress, bhai,” he says.

“Open it, motherfucker.”

The smuggler walks to the back. He opens the trunk. The boy lowers his torch and folds back the mattress. In the faint glow of the light, the AK-47s, brand new and polished, glitter like a prize.

The boy stares transfixed. A slow smile breaks out on his face. He caresses the AK-47s and relaxes his shoulders for just a moment, which causes the strap of his gun to slip off. The smuggler takes a step back, wraps his fingers around the butt of his pistol, and with a trembling hand, he shoots him. Twice.

He turns and fires at the other one.

The shots echo in the hills. Then there’s complete silence.

The gun slips off the smuggler’s hand. He’s stunned, cold. He drops to his knees. Breathing heavily, he stares at the dead body in front of him, of the one whose face was covered. After a moment of hesitation, he walks to the body and slips off the scarf. It’s not her. He kicks the boy’s face. “Fucking Maoists,” he screams. “Come; come and get me if you can.” He spits on the body and gets into the van.

Inside the sentry he sees two naked policemen, sprawling on the ground with slashed throats.

The wind howls past the open window. The smuggler drives fast, trembling, sweating. Suddenly he jams on the brake as the bile from the pit of his stomach rises in uncontrollable fury and splatters all over his legs. He bends his head over the steering wheel and passes out.

When dawn breaks, the smuggler opens his eyes, his head burning. The bottle is empty save for a last drop. He smashes it on the road and drives on while the river gushes with a maddening force below. The image of the boys keeps flashing before him. They were peasants, her people. This stretch of highway is narrow and tilted over a gorge. He, who knows each bend and curve like his lover's body, feels his concentration slipping. They forced him to pull the trigger. It wasn't him. They shouldn't have been there in the first place. He was jolted back when he squeezed that trigger. The smuggler drives fast, faster than he ever has.

Once he had bought these stupid earrings for Gori. When he staggered to her room drunk, she was looking at a palm-size mirror, putting a tika on her forehead like a married woman. When their eyes met, he felt like she was his bride waiting for him in their house. He made fun of her silliness; called her a fool and she teased him, called him a drunk. When he opened his palm to reveal the earrings, she smiled and made him thread them through her ears.

He'd slipped her out from the back door and taken her for a ride. She put her head out the window and her earrings jingled in the wind.

"When will you take me away and we can do this without fear?" she'd asked.

The smuggler approaches the last stretch into Kathmandu. The red flags begin to disappear. The road becomes busier with a smattering of trucks and buses. A police van is lazily parked on a side; cops playing a card game inside. The Maoists draw their boundaries with blood. The heat dries it off and the rain washes it away. What was the fucking point? A tinge of orange splashes over the bluish tips of the hills. The smuggler stops the van and gets out.

Somewhere above him a bird sings from a loopy branch. A vague sense of pride pricks the smuggler. He'd just killed some rats.

He drives to a petrol pump. A man covered in a shawl stands leaning against an electric pole, struggling to stay awake. The smuggler kicks the man's bare foot. "I just saved your fucking country," he says. The man wakes with a startle, scratches his head and goes about filling up the van. Even in this early morning, a group of children, dressed in dirty school uniform, sit in a circle throwing dice. They scream and curse at each other. A woman pokes her head out of a window. "Hurry, go to school," she yells. "Wait," a kid shouts back. The woman comes running down with a broom and the kids scamper away, grabbing their satchels.

The smuggler goes to a teashop, asks the girl at the counter for a half-bottle of Everest whiskey.

"So early?" she says.

He loosens the cap and drinks it straight. It rips into his gut like fire. He polishes off half of it and tucks the bottle in his back pocket.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Do you want to marry me?" he asks the girl.

For a while she looks at him, then covers her face and giggles.

"Crazy," she says.

He leans closer to her. "I'm lonely. Do you understand? I'm fucking lonely," he says and throws some bills on the counter.

Then he gets into the van and drives into his city.

## HIGH HEELS

Sarita was up at the crack of dawn to practice her walk in her new high heels, but she just hadn't been able to garner the grace that Hindi film heroines were so famous for; she admired the ease with which they walked, talked, and moved their curvaceous bodies in rain-soaked dances. That said, Sarita was fiercely opposed to the mind-corrupting influence of movies and allowed herself the luxury to watch songs on Zee TV for no more than half hour every morning. Today, the half hour had extended well beyond the appropriate limit, which she realized only when her wall clock struck nine and announced "Glory be to God; you are late for work." Sarita had traveled to Switzerland, imagining herself in Kareena Kapoor's place, dancing in the snow in her high heels, chased by the hopelessly romantic Salman when God relayed his message through the clock. Sarita immediately shut the TV and knelt before the Happy-Jesus clock repeating "Glory Be to God, free me from impure thoughts" thirty times, once for every minute wasted. Reassured that God would forgive her for this sin, Sarita rose to her feet and set her mind to the day ahead.

"Glory Be to God, free me from impure thoughts," she said again as she stood before the mirror and knotted the drawstring of her kurta-suruwal. A touch of Ruby lipstick and a squirt of Lakme Elegant perfume later Sarita slipped into her red high heels. She felt as if she'd been upgraded into a higher rank of being. It secretly pleased her to think of this, and instead of taking the crowded three-wheeler to the bank, she took a taxi. But some things never changed. As soon as she reached her desk and sat down, out came the jeers.

“Here is Mary,” the rascal Binod said and the rest of them snickered. “Mary, when will you marry?” someone chipped in; they coughed, trying hard to hold back their laughter. Sarita stood and faced all three of them, her temper on edge for these pathetic souls. “What you all need is a good doze of salvation,” she said, “but you don’t even deserve it; salvation is earned, not seized, and as the Bible says only the Lord has the power to bestow it upon you.” The room was quiet for a moment. Then they burst out laughing. Sarita sat down, her back to them. She could feel their taunts. Their laughter crept up her spine. “Mary, you so scary,” they said. “We also know English, see?” Sarita rose from her chair and walked out of the room, clicking and clacking her high heels down the long aisle of the bank. Heads turned from behind cubicles, and for a brief moment, Sarita wondered if her co-workers noticed anything new, but not a single compliment came her way.

It was a crisp Kathmandu morning. Sarita exited the brick building and went to her usual corner in the alley where a cobbler sat on a patch of land with his leather, hammer, and cleats. “First-class,” the cobbler said, gesturing at her heels with his chin. Ignoring him, Sarita took out the small Bible from her purse. She summoned the three co-workers to mind and read aloud from the bookmarked page: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” and line 25 “When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” She prayed and prayed, feverishly, repeating the same verses again and again until her mind ached and her shoulders trembled and she had a vision of the Lord, so gloriously fair and handsome, looking down, spreading his light onto her. She heard a voice, His voice, telling her it was okay. She looked skyward, her eyes closed, and free from all cares and burdens, she broke into sobs of joy. When it was all over, and she opened

her eyes, a one-armed beggar was standing next to her, waving his good arm for alms. “Such a poor little creature,” Sarita muttered and went back to her office.

The three who’d been shuffling receipts and bills on their desks, looked at one another and smiled as Sarita entered. Somehow she had to get through this day. She sat on her desk, behind the glass partition, and took out the wooden cross from her purse. She placed it firmly on her desk so that it stared directly back at the hecklers. She heard their snickers and coughs. This was her morning ritual; to tweak the angle of the cross just so that it stared back at them and fenced them off. Among the three, she hated Binod the most. Blessed with a handsome appearance, and if she were to go by his bragging, a master’s in History, the man was a complete show-off. She especially hated the way he said “Good morning, Miss Mary,” swinging his keychain on his finger. Disgusting was the word that came to her mind. How often had she made *him* the subject of confession at church, which reminded her—she would go there straight from work. It was her turn to lead the prayer tonight and she was intent on making a good impression.

Sarita put her focus back on her work. The office was buzzing already, with customers queuing up to collect their money. Sarita and the three men were hauled up in this cramped remittance room with an awkward table arrangement where her back was perpetually exposed to the crude eyes and remarks of those male co-workers. So many times Sarita complained to management, but they kept brushing it off as a temporary arrangement. Unlike the main section of the bank where a glass partition was fitted from one end to another, behind which senior clerks sat in their cubicles, the remittance room had no ventilation. It smelled of sweat and ink and the walls were in need of paint. Sarita wondered when she’d be promoted to the other room; if this was God’s way of testing her endurance and what the reward might be if she passed the test, yet she was quick to remind herself that she should *not* expect a reward as if God owed her

one; God would keep his promise and grace her with a reward when the time was right. Besides, Sarita wasn't too unhappy to occupy an exclusive spot in front; at least, she didn't have to sit *with* the vile rank of backbenchers, especially that leader of the gang, Binod.

Sarita handed out cash to a long line of people who gave her their secret code, showed her their ID cards, and collected wads of money that their fathers and brothers wired from Saudi Arabia and Dubai. Meanwhile, she considered buying a kilo of rasbharis for the evening mass as a gesture of appreciation though it was not her turn to do so. Pastor Dominique had introduced a new rule where every member of the congregation had to bring an offering as a gesture of appreciation—a small something—that would be of some value to the church. Last month, when it was her turn, Sarita had brought a poster of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus in her arms. Pastor Dominique had praised Sarita's astute judgment in selecting the finest poster, and everyone, including that witch Jenny, had complimented her, though Jenny's compliment, only Sarita knew, was tinged with the jealousy of a rival. Sarita was secretly pleased by the thought that she was a few notches above Jenny in the good books of Pastor Dominique. It was he who'd baptized her with the name Mary, a week after he had discovered her and saved her from an eternally cursed life as a Dhami. The pastor had shown up outside their mud-covered house on the outskirts of Kathmandu, two blessed years before, wearing a sharp blue shirt and carrying a Bible and some mangoes. He sat on a mound of hay by the cow shed and read several stories from the Bible, including the one about how the Lord healed the blind and lepers with nothing but miracle and mud. While the rest of her family sat on their haunches sucking on the pastor's mangoes, Sarita had been mesmerized by his presence, his lilting Darjeeling accent, and his smile which still lingered in her senses. It was as if he had appeared out of the fog like a blast of sunlight, carrying stories so beautiful they spread a light in her heart. Most of all, the stories

spoke to Sarita of a world where she'd be taken in as an equal by the Lord, not cast aside as a Dhimi as some in her village were wont to do. From that day she followed the light, all the way to the city, despite her parents' fears of the foreign religion, despite a potential teaching job in her village school what with her I.A. degree and all, despite the seduction of an endless life roaming and roving the hills and paddy fields she grew up around, despite the prospects of marriage and family. Despite all that, Sarita had knelt before the light and look where the Lord had led her to already: Kathmandu, in a single-room apartment all by herself, with a bank job anyone in the village would be cuttngly jealous of.

“How about some coffee and cake, Mary? It's a beautiful day,” Binod said, sitting on the edge of her desk. It was lunch time and there was no one else in the room. Binod had waited for his comrades to leave before approaching Sarita with his tired and routine proposal that she, thankfully, never fell for. As if that would discourage him. He swung the motorcycle keychain on one finger and leaned so close that a whiff of his aftershave shot across her face. She held up her hanky to her nose. “I'm busy,” she said, “and have decided to stay that way the rest of the day.” Binod shrugged and left the room whistling some cheap filmy tune. Just as soon he came back. “Actually, I have a question, a genuine one,” he said. “I'd love to hear about the Bible from you.”

Sarita knew this was a trick. He just wanted an excuse to annoy her. “I told you I'm busy. Do you want me to explain to you in English also?”

“What I want, Mary, is for you to explain the Bible to me. I really mean it.”

She looked at him. He was handsome, no doubt, with high cheekbones and a striking nose. “I'm busy,” she said and looked away. He didn't say anything for a while and she wondered what he was up to. “I know you think I'm a gunda; in reality I just want to be your

friend, but I'm also really interested to learn about your religion," he said, sounding as innocent as a child, and Sarita felt trapped. Yes, she *hated* the person standing before her, perhaps more than anyone else in the world, but could she turn him away? Wasn't it her duty to guide a lost soul who finds his way to God's heart? Sarita was confused. She shuffled some papers on her table, not knowing what to do. This Binod sometimes had that effect on her. But she couldn't be the one to judge his intentions, only the Lord had that power, for the scripture commends the person who obeys God's laws and helps others obey them at every opportunity. Pastor Dominique always stressed this point, and though other sisters and brothers showed off by bringing new members to the church, Sarita, despite her inner voice setting her on a straight path, had never been granted the opportunity. "Sarita?" Binod said, shattering her thoughts.

"Yes, let's go," Sarita said and felt a flush of embarrassment for she had never gone out alone with a man for anything, much less for coffee and cake.

As they walked the long aisle of the bank, heads turned. People had nothing better to do than cast their suspicions from behind the counters and pass comments. And of course, Binod had to make it worse. He smiled and waved at the row of cubicles and made a show of walking out with Sarita. Just her cursed luck that she had to take small, measured steps to avoid tripping over on her high heels. She clutched her purse tightly to her chest and avoided the gaze of scrutinizers and gossipers who didn't have it in their luck to be asked out for lunch by anyone. Outside, Binod's swanky motorbike awaited them. Sarita had always seen this vehicle from afar, never up close. It was shiny and black with sharp edges all around and so many buttons that Sarita wondered, with just a tinge of hope, if it would in fact take off like a rocket.

"What do you think?" Binod asked.

She was mesmerized by the machine.

“What is there to think?” she said. “Don’t expect me to sit on this thing now, okay? I have to get back to work quickly. Besides, I can’t tell you about the Bible and our church if you’re going to ride this—this machine.”

“Oh, come on,” he said. “Just one spin. We won’t be late, I promise.”

Despite her doubts and discomfort, Sarita found herself sitting behind Binod and off he went speeding through the crowded streets. Seconds later, they were out on Ringroad and Binod sped faster and Sarita’s heart beat like she didn’t know it was capable of beating and her hair blew in the wind like it had suddenly discovered freedom. She screamed to Binod to slow down but she couldn’t hear her own voice so she ended up laughing at her own silliness. She clutched the metal bar behind the seat with both hands as he swerved the bike in and out amongst trucks and cars and Sarita felt her heart swinging in her chest and a rush of blood explode in her veins. She screamed in delight and fear and she screamed into the wind, but just as soon, she realized that in a moment of weakness, her hands had left the bar and were tightly wrapped around Binod’s waist. She withdrew her hands, and not knowing what else to do with them, started punching Binod’s back, begging him to stop, stop, STOP!

Binod stopped outside a dusty restaurant on the highway. The place looked like a crumbling mansion. Sarita quickly got off the motorbike. They were far away from office, and there was no one for miles except a lone waiter standing by a table with a fly swat in his hand. A quiet fear tickled Sarita. She didn’t really know Binod, after all. She looked around for a sign, something, anything, that would warn her of potential harm, like a black cat crossing her path. No sign presented itself except the cracks and mold on the pillars by the front steps. Sarita wondered if this place was haunted at night. By the ghost of Rana princes, carrying daggers, stalking the dead in the dark, climbing endless, creaky staircases.

“Are you okay?” Binod said.

“Perfectly fine.”

“I’ve been wanting to show you something.”

Out in the back was a circular veranda overlooking the sprawling Kathmandu valley: old brick houses and ancient temples jostled against cement highrises, spread out beneath the blue hills. Sarita hadn’t realized they’d rode all the way up here.

“Beautiful isn’t it?” Binod said. “I always come here, when I need to get away, you know?”

“Why did you bring me here and when are we going back to work?”

“Oh ho, relax, will you?” He pulled up a chair for her. Their table was one of many lined along the arch of the veranda. Sarita noticed a patch of bougainvillea harnessed on to the railing which reminded her of dry corns that hung by the windows of her village house. How far she’d come—to be sitting in a restaurant with a man from the city.

Binod snapped his fingers for the waiter and ordered two coffees and fruitcakes. “Make it fast. We’re busy,” he said, and to her he added, “fruitcakes here? Simply the best!”

“How many girls have you said that to?”

“Let me see. You’re the thirty-sixth.”

“Very funny.”

He let out that beguiling smile.

She wished he’d say something more but he shifted his chair slightly to face the view, his ankles crossed on top of the railing. They sat in silence, she wondering what he was thinking of.

The waiter brought their order in an engraved, silver tray. His bow tie seemed odd in this deserted place.

Sarita sipped her coffee without looking at Binod, but felt his gaze on her. Each time she laid eyes on him, he wasn't looking at her, but out over the hills, lost in some thought. The top three buttons of his shirt were undone. She noticed a faint scar on his neck, like a birth mark—the only touch of imperfection in a perfectly sculpted man. She felt a tingle somewhere deep. She reached for the fruitcake and took a bite.

“I just love this place,” he said and moved his chair to face her. “I often come here alone. I'm glad I brought you today.” Their eyes fell on each other. She looked away.

“I really mean it, Sarita,” he said. “We should do this more often. What do you think?”

“I think we should go.”

He smiled and let out a sigh.

“You hate me, don't you?”

“I don't know.”

He leaned closer. “What are you thinking?” he said. “Aching to read the Bible?” He laughed. That mean, sarcastic laugh. She hated his guts. She felt like whacking him with her purse. “Why do you always torture me? What have I done to you?”

He placed his hand on top of hers and circled her soft skin with the tip of his finger. She was frightened and elated. She drew her hand back.

“Sorry,” he said and cleared his throat. “Look, I tease you because I like you. I really want to be your friend, but there's no way around you. You're so tense all the time.”

“You gang up with your chamchas and harass a girl. You lack confidence and inner strength. It really shows.”

“Okay, now. That is going a little too far.”

“And the way you taunt and tease me every day. That's not far, mister?”

“Drop it now. I’ll change. Promise. I swear.”

She noticed that he was embarrassed and she quietly approved of this but didn’t let on. She wasn’t going to fall for his tricks so easily, though she wondered, as she often did, what he really thought of her.

“Your parents must be looking for a good Hindu girl for you, no?” she asked him.

“Why? You have someone in mind for me?”

“I’m not joking; but seriously, how religious are you?”

“Never gave it a thought,” he said. “Though sometimes when I’m alone, I feel like I need something, or someone.” He looked at her. “I get tired of the race. The pressure to earn, to be a dashing personality.” He sighed and looked away.

She took out the Bible.

“Madam can’t wait, can she?”

She turned to page 26: “Read,” she said.

“Seriously?”

“For me...for yourself.”

He took the Bible from her and let it rest in his palm for a moment as if he was weighing its worth. The golden inscription of *The Bible* shone on the cover. He ran his finger along the etched letters, then lightly scratched the soft-leather spine with his thumb nail. He turned the pages and scanned the words. Sarita observed him carefully. He seemed to be reading more than a few lines.

“Which passage are you reading?” she asked. For a while he didn’t remove his eyes from the page. Then he looked at her and put the book down. From a small case clipped on to his belt, he took out his sunglasses. He wiped it on his shirt and put them on. “Original Ray ban,” he said.

“Read the Bible!”

“It’s heavy English,” he said. “Such big words they use. So much torture.”

“You have a Master’s degree, no?”

He looked at her from over the rim of his sunglasses, his left eyebrow arched. He then removed the glasses, sat up straight, turned to the bookmarked page, cleared his throat, and read: “I stand at the door, and knock; if a man hears my voice, and opens the door, I will eat with him, and he with me...Whoever brings back a sinner from his lost journey will save his soul from death ....James 1:20...What does this mean, Mary?”

“God will always protect the lost soul if the lost soul lets him enter his house.”

“Am I a lost soul?”

“Everyone is.”

He leaned closer and whispered, “Can the lost soul get a small dose of salvation now?”

“Salvation comes to those who wait,” she said and quickly regretted her response. She had to learn to be more tactful.

He gave the Bible back to her. “This heavy reading is not for me, but I really don’t mind being lectured by a smart and beautiful tutor,” he said.

“Time up; end of lesson.”

“You can’t really get back to work, can you?” He got up from his chair. “Madam,” he said and led her out. On the ride back, Sarita sat askance, both feet on one side of the vehicle, holding on to the metal bar. It started to rain, the first of many monsoon rains. Soon she was drenched but she didn’t care. As they rode into town they flowed past the rows of brick houses whose facades were adorned with peeled off political posters and whose crammed spaces were

let out to rooftop cafes, bookshops, vegetable shops, bicycle repair shops, barbers and butchers who squatted in a row, smoking their cigarettes, staring at the rain and at passersby.

“How are you feeling?” Binod turned back and asked.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “Just keep driving.”

The rain came down hard. Binod stopped by a temple. “Let’s go in and wait this thing out. Come, come, fast,” he said. Sarita looked around. Small crowds had gathered outside every shop, huddled under tin awnings. She hesitated to step inside a temple. “You can wash off the impurity later.” Binod held her hand and led her into the narrow courtyard. They removed their shoes at the entrance. The temple looked like it was built in haste, to let stray dogs wander in for a brief shelter from the rain. Were it not for a row of diyas burning in front of Kali’s statue, it would have been impossible to navigate in the dark. The only other person in this cave-like room was a bearded beggar stooping for coins that devotees placed as offerings at the foot of Kali. The room was permeated with the smell of tika and vermilion powder and the stench of uncollected garbage that wafted in from the alley. The beggar cursed drunkenly at the statue. He shot a glance at Sarita and grinned. His gums were swollen as if they had melted over his teeth. He pointed a mock gun at her and pulled the trigger thrice: dhikchau, dhikchau, dhikchau.

“E muji, get out of here or I’ll turn you into a pulp,” Binod said and the beggar staggered out. Binod offered her a clean handkerchief to wipe her face with, but Sarita had one in her own purse. She let her wet hair fall then combed her fingers through it and gently squeezed the end. Then she threw her hair back. He was looking at her. She felt a bit shy, but safe around him, which surprised her. In him there was a hidden capacity to care, she saw it. She wished she could take him to church. They would kneel and pray together. She wondered what he would think of that. She was now beyond doubt that the church was the guiding force he needed to turn his life

around. Everyone needed a sign, and this moment, right now, rain and thunder, was Binod's to seize. Besides, Sarita was slightly disgusted at the state of this temple, like so many other temples in the city. How ancient it looked compared to her clean, brightly lit church. Though it had only been two years since she had last been in a temple, it felt like her first time in a strange world. She wanted to escape this dismal place and run to her church and fall on her knees before the altar and surrender herself completely to the Lord who had died selflessly for her sins. She closed her eyes and saw an image in which she swayed her arms in the air, crying for forgiveness before Jesus who rose from the dead, and she tore up the stairs to heaven where he waited with open arms.

“Sarita, Sarita.” Binod shook her and brought her back to reality.

“Sorry,” she said.

“No, you look beautiful,” he said. His face was close to hers and she could smell his sweet breath. He looked at her cleavage which was wet and exposed. She covered it with her dupatta. Their eyes locked. She felt a rush. Her lips quivered. He touched her lips with his finger and began kissing them slowly. He placed his hands on her shoulders and they kissed like they needed each other right there and then. Her knees felt weak and she had no strength to resist. When she realized what she was doing she pulled back with a jolt.

“What are you doing?” she said.

He stared at her, breathing loudly. Then without warning, he slid his hand underneath her kameez and squeezed her naked breast. She slapped him and pushed him away. She wasn't sure if she should stay or run, but she stood, her chest heaving. He looked stunned himself and the air between them quickly turned dense.

He hurried to his bike. She simply followed and sat behind him. The rain had abated. Taxis, tempos and motorbikes converged upon the street like a mass of prisoners suddenly let loose. Sarita felt trapped in a swarm of noise and smoke. She was angry and confused, unable to sort through her feelings. It didn't help that she could smell the mixture of musky cologne and damp sweat emanating from Binod's back. This was not even the sort of thing she could take to the confession. Pastor Dominique would punish her with his silence for months, and if word got out, her reputation would surely fall and Jenny would hop about with joy. She knew God would forgive her, though in her heart she felt she deserved to be punished so she wouldn't be bold enough to be so reckless again.

Binod looked distant and embarrassed as they walked to the bank. He was a few steps ahead and she was in no mood to talk to him either. The least he could do was say something, but no, he kept walking as if she didn't exist. As if she had never existed and what happened was simply a—never mind, she thought, though a yearning to hear his voice grew in her, to hear him say it was going to be alright. As soon as they entered the bank, faces turned from behind cubicles. Someone coughed; someone else whistled. The manager, out on a surveillance stroll, said, "What is it with you two? Get back to work quickly."

Binod's old gait returned and he swung the key chain around his finger. Sarita walked without looking at anyone. Parts of her salwar were still damp. She covered her chest with her purse and stumbled awkwardly in her high heels. Binod stopped to talk to another girl and as Sarita passed him, she could feel his head turn to assess her back. She slipped into her office and apologized to waiting customers who quickly queued up in front of her desk. She wiped her face and hands with a fresh handkerchief and got down to work. The comrades were working quietly

until Binod entered and took his seat. Amidst the clitter clatter of work, he drummed his fingers on the desk and sang, not caring that there were women and older men around.

“Show me your love; show me your love.

We kissed but all that’s left in my mouth is the bitter taste of your saliva.

We laughed but you fled just as I was coming alive for you...

Give me your love. Give me your love.

You expose your back to me, but cover your front.

You offer your lips to me but hide your love

I need you; oh I so need you so...”

She had permitted him to meddle with her feelings. “One moment okay, dai?” she said to an elderly customer with a kind face. She reached in her purse and took out her cross. She placed it on her desk at the precise angle of display. Then she took off one shoe. All day the weight of her body had rested on her poor feet crunched in those high heels. It felt good to let the foot get some air. She even cracked a bone in her toe. Then she hurled the shoe at him. He ducked. She took off the other one and threw it with such force that the stiletto stabbed his face like a dagger even though he tried to shield it with his arm. The room erupted with laughter. The manager walked in. “What nonsense is this? Come to my office immediately,” he said.

The manager gave them a dressing down with his office door open so everyone could hear. Then he suspended them without pay for one week. Sarita pleaded. She couldn’t afford to lose a week’s salary. She clasped her hands. “If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins,” she said. She repeated the verse again, her hands shaking, but the manager had none of it. “Enough of this silliness,” he said and shut his office door. Sarita felt naked, standing bare feet on the cold tile, everyone looking at her. She

left the building and was soon lost in the crowded street; her feet invariably moved toward the church. She didn't turn back but she knew he was following her. Even the din of the market place couldn't drown out his voice screaming, "Wait, wait for me."

### THE KING'S STATUE

Lakshmi opens one eye, then the other. Her gaze meets a crack on the ceiling. She rubs her eyes with her finger. The electric heater next to her bed is too weak to fight the backbreaking cold that has invaded her room this afternoon.

Lakshmi pries out her transistor radio from under her pillow and turns the knob.

*“...This is Radio Nepal: Opposition calls for a five-day strike in the capital, and in three separate incidents, elderly couples killed and robbed by male servants...”*

Lakshmi twists the knob carefully. The broken needle sputters, making the airwaves buzz like insects. Lakshmi’s knows this is a sign—the servants are invading the country.

A ray of sunlight slips under the door. Lakshmi pokes her toe out from under the cotton blanket hoping to lure it, but the light taunts her and fades into dusk. “Eat my shit,” Lakshmi says. She emits a long belch, which leaves a bitter taste in her mouth. It’s the heartburn, again. “This heart has turned old and sour,” Lakshmi mutters.

The chill seeps in through the latched windows and lingers under Lakshmi’s fingernails. She decides to go to the kitchen and boil some garlic water to soothe her ailing chest. The pain is sharp, and the only cure is to take her mind off it. “Ram Ram, Hare Krishna,” Lakshmi mutters. She looks at her grandson, captured in a framed picture on the wall. Even on a cycle he’s wearing a helmet! This proves that Gaurav has become an American. Even Lakshmi knows this.

When her daughter had won the lottery visa and flown to America with her family two years ago, Lakshmi’s chest had swollen with pride, though she was troubled by the thought that Anju’s glorious Rana lineage wouldn’t be recognized in America. Not that it bothered Anju. Lakshmi’s daughter always likened their noble ancestry to a quilt, handed down through generations, now shrunk and stored in an old cupboard. If Anju wanted, she could promote her ancestral name to make an impression in America, but she was Captain Saab’s daughter—too simple for a world that favored such cunning.

“Nepal or America. High class is high class,” Lakshmi says and rests her feet on the bare floor. Her back aches, her lips are cracked, and there’s a hole in her sock. She feels the hole with her toe. “It’s okay. I’m not the one to complain,” she says. This habit of talking to herself is one

she picked up right after marriage, because her husband is full of himself. Even in the presence of Captain Saab, Lakshmi talks more to herself. Why should she complain? God has been kind though things could certainly have been better.

Next to her grandson is a portrait of the deposed king Gyanendra and his family. With clasped palms, Lakshmi bows. “Forgive this country, hajur,” she says. Who knew the king and the queen could be dragged from their thrones? Lakshmi’s worst fears have indeed come true. Servants and their brothers are taking over Nepal. Lakshmi’s head will soon be scalded in hot oil and sold in the goat market. Why? Because her veins flow with Rana blood. “Stop dreaming big,” Captain Saab likes to say. “We are poor Ranas from Charikot, not kings and queens.” What does he know? He spent his life as a gatekeeper. “Cow dung has filled his brains,” Lakshmi says and goes to the other room to check on him.

The room stinks of cheap rum. Captain Saab sits by the window with his glass, cursing at the madhises who carry vegetable baskets on their heads. These madhises shout *pyyaz-golbeda-alooooo*, *bhanta-kauliiiiii*, shattering everyone’s afternoon nap. “Motherfuckers, shut your black tongues,” Captain Saab says. Lakshmi chides him for his filthy mouth. “Old crow, shut your mouth,” her husband replies, pointing to the medals on his frayed army coat. Lately, he has taken to wearing it every day, as if yelling with that coat on makes him an important person. Long ago as a security guard at the Chinese Embassy he would stand so stiff that the Chinese mistook him for a statue and stopped by to see their reflections in his shiny shoes. They named him Captain and gave him a knee-length army coat with three plastic medals stitched to its pocket. This is a story he likes to repeat to Jyoti Bahini whose husband is also a Rana from the same village, now a business man with influence. Jyoti Bahini visits in her black car to remind Lakshmi just how rich she is: the property in Chitwan, cocktail parties in five star hotels, silk saris from Singapore.

Lakshmi listens admiringly, absorbing every detail, careful not to offend her only high connection. Captain Saab says Jyoti Bahini is a dry meat whose best years are in the past.

“Dry meat, she may be for you. For me, her friendship is richer than biryani,” Lakshmi says. She latches the window and sits on a chair next to her husband, rolling wick threads for the evening prayer.

Lakshmi complains about her sour burps, then about the maid who still hasn't shown her ugly face. She had asked for more money, this maid. In the old days servants wanted nothing but a meal and a handful of chiura which they tied into a bundle at the end of their sari. Now, Lakshmi raised eyebrow is returned with a jungle gaze, so she has stopped raising it altogether. A raised eyebrow that gets lost in a heap of wrinkles is useless, anyhow.

“You have wasted your life worrying over these petty servants,” Captain Saab says. “Regal servants, I have heard of. In the palaces and gardens of China. Regal servants covered in the finest fabric embroidered with glittering gold. Such servants I have heard of.”

Lakshmi cuts him off. “If the maid doesn't come you can eat the shit of those servants because I will not wash dishes with cold water.”

“Do not climb a tree to look for a fish—this is a famous saying in China. You have wasted your life looking for your ideal servant.”

“What about those regal servants whose feet you're so eager to lick?”

“Lick me my old woman,” Captain Saab says and laughs revealing a row of teeth with gaps between them.

“And who will cook and look after the house?”

“A man will never soil his pride with the soot and grime of a kitchen. That is a woman's destiny.”

“What pride are you boasting of when you have none left? You should be ashamed of calling yourself a Rana.”

“I’m a Charikot Rana,” Captain Saab grumbles.

That’s all he can ever say. “A Charikot Rana who can’t even wear his pajamas properly,” Lakshmi says.

“That safety-pin is lost again,” her husband tells her. He shows her how wide the hem of his pajamas stretches. “Want to slip in and make love, budi?” he adds.

Lakshmi is not amused. “Go, bring me the string,” she says.

Captain Saab stands with his back to her, lifts his coat. Whistling a Naryayan Gopal song, he slowly takes off his trousers and jiggles his bottom at her.

Lakshmi beats her head with her palm. With his trousers around his ankles, Captain Saab staggers to the cupboard from which he brings her the needle case. Lakshmi fishes out a petticoat string, which she threads into the trousers, bit by bit. Her fingers tremble.

“Your class ruled this country for hundreds of years and you have been happy to rub your nose in the shit of those ching-chung Chinese apes,” she says.

“Don’t start that again.”

“All you have really been good at is opening the bottle behind your wife’s back.”

““I am a Rana from the village. I don’t pretend to be related to any big person. What did your kings and queens do besides washing their feet with Coca-Cola?”

“Jyoti Bahini’s husband hailed from Charikot. So what if he takes bribes? He has a big house with a car and a cupboard filled with jewelry. People ask him for favors everywhere he goes.”

“That crook carried mustard oil in his pockets and greased every palm he saw. I retired as head of security with an income of a second-class officer. It is not in my fate to have a wife who would be proud of my service. I am stuck with a jealous witch.” Captain Saab flings a ball of muck, which he has rubbed off his skin, at her.

The muck drops on the floor. Lakshmi kneels down and finds it curled like an insect on the gray tile. She picks it up and flicks it back at him with her middle finger. “People who care for their families carry oil in their pockets. It is called being a man. But real manliness was never in you,” she says.

Captain Saab takes out a bottle from under his chair and throws the cheap rum in Lakshmi’s face. The alcohol stings her eyes and dissolves into the lines of her face. She wipes her face with his pajamas. “You cannot crack my hard skin,” she says while he staggers out of the room in his underwear.

To ignore his tantrums is to humiliate him. Lakshmi throws his pajamas on the floor, then draws her knees to her stomach and closes her eyes. What else can one do? Daily power cuts have ensured that their old TV remains a piece of furniture, gathering dust on top of old suitcases. Lakshmi falls asleep on the chair. Just as the tube light flickers and comes to life, she opens one eye, then the other. She doesn’t know how long she slept for and wonders if the maid has come, but there is no sound of any activity in the kitchen. Captain Saab is back in the chair by the window, wearing his coat, a glass of his evening quota on the ledge. The light throws a pale glow on him, revealing the rum-filled veins on his scalp. Lakshmi has decided not to chop radish for him. She wills herself to leave the chair, but the winter chill has a way of locking her bones into paralysis. “Hare Krishna,” she says. She grabs the armrest, hoists herself up slowly, and goes to the latrine.

The glass pane above the sink boasts of mustard oil, Crest toothpaste—which Anju sent from America—and a row of colorful powders. There’s also a comb with which Lakshmi dyes her hair when she’s in the mood. A hint of clayish-red gave people an idea of her prestigious khandan. When she was younger, Lakshmi had been famous for her bob-cuts and for drawing up the pallu of her sari just so to reveal her navel long before such boldness was in fashion. How clever exposing her navel was! It proved her sophistication, without people pointing their finger at her. Lakshmi has often wondered what might have been if she’d been married higher. With her youthful grace and ambition, she would surely make an impression in the banquet halls of five star hotels. Instead, she has spent her life wielding her authority at servants and shopkeepers whose daily company she cannot surpass, and so Lakshmi is grateful for Jyoti Bahini’s visits, though she’s never been invited to their house. Lakshmi doesn’t ask. She also suspects that Jyoti Bahini is lonely in her big house. Their driver delivers a gift every now and then, the most recent of which was an expensive flower-patterned Pashmina Shawl that Lakshmi has kept for a special occasion. In return for such favors Lakshmi wants to be Jyoti Bahini’s trusted friend, someone the young lady can pour her heart into. “I could lend my ear, even massage her feet,” Lakshmi says to herself, then smiles at this silly idea. She turns on the tap; splashes her face with cold water. Wiping her face with a towel that hangs on a nail by the sink, Lakshmi thinks about the maid who still hasn’t shown up with her dark face.

In the kitchen, Lakshmi puts a kettle of water on the gas stove. She can feel the acidity boiling in her chest. She crushes a clove of garlic and throws it in the kettle. From a plastic bag Lakshmi pries out an old radish and chops it for Captain Saab. She’s not one to sulk for too long. What is the point of behaving like a deaf-mute couple when the house is already so lonely? Setting the radish aside, she gives her damaged radio a hard thump. The needle limps into view

before dropping into the belly of the radio. No amount of shaking and wiggling lures it back, so Lakshmi is stuck with the one station that belches out headache-producing speeches by the country's new politicians.

A live broadcast of a neta's speech is on the air. He shrieks like a mad man. "I will hire the ex-king to sweep my toilet," he says to a loud cheer. "Ranas and janjatis will soon eat from the same plate. Brothers and sisters, this is democracy." Janjatis—those sweepers and servants! Lakshmi shuts the radio. It too has turned into a traitor. Sipping her garlic water, Lakshmi sits on a stool, thinking over important matters. Is the soot on the wall a reflection of her charred potential, she wonders. A week after the king was forced to step down, Balram Rana—Jyoti Bahini's husband—was among those accused in a hundred-crore corruption scandal. By the time a mob gathered outside their gate with sticks and stones, the family was already on a plane to Singapore where Jyoti Bahini ended up buying a suitcase full of silk saris. They returned a month later when people had already forgotten about the so-called corruption. Captain Saab said that the looters would one day be chased with a khukuri by the junta. But Jyoti Bahini is still rich and envied, and people still stoop before her. Where does that leave Captain Saab? Balram Rana is rich. Lakshmi's husband is nothing.

Lakshmi sighs. She rubs her lower neck with her finger. It feels as if a lump of hot salt is dribbling down her veins. The burning sensation spreads to her chest before dissipating. Sometimes Lakshmi wonders if her time has come, if she'll pass on before Captain Saab. She sways back and forth in her chair chanting *Govinda hari Gopala; Madhava Parameshwara. Sachada Nanda Manamohana; Murlidhara Gopala*. She closes her eyes and sees Lord Krishna wearing his peacock feather crown, raising a flute to his lips. This beautiful vision is blotched by the thought of the dark-skinned maid. "Curse her life and her family," Lakshmi mutters. She gets

up and sprinkles salt over the radish, then takes the plate to the other room where she puts it next to Captain Saab's glass. "I'm going to the market," she says. "If that randi comes, make sure she doesn't leave until I return." Captain Saab lights a cigarette and smokes with his palm cupped. "Did you hear me?" Lakshmi says. He says something under his breath. "I'll buy some spinach for you," Lakshmi says and leaves him alone.

She stands before the cupboard deciding on the right earrings to go with her faded cotton sari. The choice is between gold and pearl, both pure, bought as good investments with Captain Saab's salary years ago. Anju has promised to send new earrings from America as soon as they properly settle. Lakshmi doesn't want to burden her daughter with requests so she says "settle first, then think about us." Once they do settle, Lakshmi has this tiny hope that some money will be mailed to her every month. How long *does* it take to properly settle in America, she wonders. Anyway, for now, Lakshmi looks at her pashmina that sprawls temptingly from a hanger. She feels its smooth texture, the golden threading on the border. Standing before the mirror, she wears the shawl, allowing one end to fall luxuriously over the left shoulder. It brings a rich glow to her face. She picks out the gold earrings with cascading gems. With such jewelry dangling from her ears, Lakshmi could be related to the queen herself. Lovely shoes Lakshmi doesn't own, so she wears her husband's old rubber shoes and goes to the market.

It's dark outside. The only lights on the road are those glaring from noisy cars and motorcycles. Even this short walk merges into the never-ending trial of life. "Hare Krishna," Lakshmi says walking as close to the edge as possible.

"Such bone-shivering cold! If it hadn't been for this warm and expensive shawl, I wouldn't have stepped out today," Lakshmi says to the sauni upon reaching her usual shop. The sauni sits on a sack of rice, combing her dark hair under a naked bulb.

“It is God’s mercy that we are Ranas and can afford such expensive items,” Lakshmi says. The sauni tosses a mugful of water onto a row of spinach then resumes indulging her oily tresses. “Take some spinach,” she says.

“Forty rupees for this dusty spinach! This would never happen under our beloved king!”

The sauni throws in some squash and chili with a bundle of spinach. “No more,” she says. “Big or small?” she adds.

“Small will do,” Lakshmi says in a low voice.

Out comes a bottle of rum from a shelf, which the sauni tucks underneath the spinach in the plastic bag.

Lakshmi grabs the bag and hides it under her shawl.

“I’ll pay for the squash,” she says, secretly hoping she won’t be charged for it. The sauni jots down the sale in her notebook and reminds Lakshmi that she owes the shopkeeper three hundred rupees already. Gathering a spool of hair from the comb the sauni adds, “The madam with no money.”

“I have money,” Lakshmi says. She retrieves her purse from her blouse and throws some soggy rupees on the counter. “Anju might call from America next week,” she adds. “I need to order new toothpaste also.”

“I’ve heard enough stories about people forgetting their family as soon as their feet touch the soil of America. Pay when you can. When have I ever hassled you?” the sauni says.

Lakshmi puts the money back in the purse and tucks it in her blouse. “Jyoti Bahini will visit me soon,” she says. “I’m making kheer for her. We Ranas only eat kheer made with cow milk. But this servant is making my life miserable. Still no sign of her rotten face.”

“Are you really that close to Jyoti Rana?”

“I treat her like my own sister.”

“Don’t lick her shoes so much. I hear they’re going after the king’s businesses and Jyoti Rana’s husband was involved in black business. The whole world knows. They will hang him from a pole in broad daylight. That is what I hear. Stay away from those rich people. A woman like you shouldn’t get involved in all this.”

“I’m also a Rana,” Lakshmi says, raising her chin. “We will see what happens.”

Just then a boy with a limp approaches Lakshmi. He smiles and spreads his palm. The sauni scolds him, but his dirty clothes arouse pity in Lakshmi. She takes out her purse and gives him a rupee. He turns it over as if he can’t believe someone would insult him with a rupee. He throws it back at her and walks away.

“Real Ranas give nothing less than fifty,” the sauni says.

“We will see,” Lakshmi whispers. She ignores the rupee-note, which has landed in a ditch. She walks away, rejecting the sauni’s advice to take the soiled rupee. “My gift to you,” Lakshmi mutters as she notices a black car stopping in front of the shop. Lakshmi turns back. Who else steps out of the car, but the fair-complexioned, beautiful Jyoti Rana herself. Lakshmi clutches at the plastic bag hidden under her shawl. Suddenly, the air smells of expensive perfume. Lakshmi pauses for a moment, then walks cautiously toward her friend. They’ve never met in public and Lakshmi is unsure of how to greet Jyoti Bahini, or whether Lakshmi will be acknowledged at all. The sauni, too, has come out to greet her customer, bowing her head shamelessly.

“Jyoti Bahini,” Lakshmi says raising her arm. “How nice to see you here.”

Jyoti Rana turns her head towards Lakshmi. Lakshmi can’t detect a hint of recognition in Jyoti Rana whose eyes are protected behind dark glasses. Jyoti Rana turns away.

“It’s me—your well-wishing sister, Lakshmi Rana.”

The younger Rana whispers something to the sauni who dismisses Lakshmi with a flick of her wrist. Jyoti Rana buys a packet of cigarette, which the sauni first cleans thoroughly with the hem of her sari. Lakshmi is suddenly self-conscious. Had she just made a fool of herself? The brief transaction is already over. Jyoti Rana walks back to the car. Before she steps inside, Jyoti Rana pauses. She looks at Lakshmi. Lakshmi smiles at her.

“Everything is fine?” Jyoti Rana says.

“By the grace of god,” Lakshmi says.

Jyoti Rana enters the car and drives away with a loud screech.

Lakshmi looks at the sauni. “Jyoti Rana did not recognize her own sister. Must be those dark glasses,” the sauni says.

“She said, hello. Didn’t you see?”

“Oh, how kind of her,” the sauni says, a smirk curled at the edge of her lip.

Lakshmi flicks her own wrist at the sauni and walks away. She shouldn’t have been so bold as to think that Jyoti Rana would oblige her in public. If this ruined their friendship, Lakshmi had no one but herself to blame.

“The king’s statues will be crushed. Balram Rana will be hunted down!” A newspaper boy waves a copy of the evening paper. This gets Lakshmi’s attention. She calls out to the boy who rushes to her and thrusts a newspaper in her hands. “Five rupees,” the boy says.

“Is it really true?” Lakshmi asks. She takes out her purse from her blouse. This explains Jyoti bahini’s abrupt behavior. How foolish of Lakshmi not to have known.

“Quick, quick,” the boy says. Lakshmi gives him a crumpled five-rupee note. “Is it really true?” she asks again, but the boy has already darted off to the next customer.

Lakshmi squints at the headline: “The King’s Statue will be Crushed! Bribe Takers will be Hanged!” As Lakshmi attempts to read the first line, she hears the rumble of motorcycles. A long line of riders, waving hammer and sickle flags, suddenly speed towards her. Some of them are holding up pictures of people whose faces are scrawled with coal. One of those is Balram Rana’s. Lakshmi’s heart swells with pride. Does anyone care that she knows his wife personally? People stand on the edge of the street to make way for the motorcycles. Lakshmi bunches her fist at them. “Donkeys!” she yells. A man standing idly turns to look at her. Lakshmi walks away, feeling his gaze on her back.

In the kitchen, Lakshmi hides the bottle of rum inside a rusty tin can. She’ll let him open it at four the next day, not a minute earlier, even if he hits her. She goes to the other room to share the big news. Captain Saab, though, can barely stand. A trail of spit dribbles from the corner of his lips. “Only two pegs,” he says.

“Read this. Read this,” she whispers, holding up the newspaper. He clutches at it with both hands, then slumps in the chair, eyes closed.

Lakshmi ignores him, goes back to the kitchen. She turns on her radio. A few thumps later, the useless thing comes to life. The same man from the afternoon is at it, his voice coarse from constant screaming. “Every statue of the king will be crushed,” he says. “Every nose, every ear, every pair of eyes, every single eye lash will be blown to pieces. Balram Rana! You’re next!” A thousand drums roar in the background. The man’s voice gets louder. Lakshmi is gripped by an extraordinary fear. She shuts the radio. Her chest aches with a dull throbbing. Feeling the wall for support, she manages to walk to her bedroom. She lies down, closes her eyes. The dark room fills with the shadow of the maid. The shadow pours in through the crack under the door and spreads over Lakshmi. The maid is thin and dark-skinned, a baby wrapped on

her back. She's carrying a hammer. She raises her hands high in the air and brings the hammer down. Lakshmi wakes up in terror. The pounding of her heart sounds like someone trying to break down the door. She goes to the other room. Major Saab is standing, the radio held to his ear. On low volume the drumbeats sound like a swarm of people marching from afar.

“They are coming to get us,” she says.

“You fool. Stop dreaming big,” Captain Saab says. His knees buckle and he drops on the floor. The radio lands on the hard floor. It screeches like a helpless animal, then dies out. Lakshmi throws a quilt over Captain Saab. The tube light flickers. It's suddenly dark and quiet. Lakshmi gropes at the wall, finds the torch light in the cupboard. With its help she unlocks the telephone which is kept in a padlocked box so the maid can never take advantage of it when Lakshmi is not home.

She finds Jyoti Bahini's number in a small notebook. One by one Lakshmi punches in the number.

The telephone rings endlessly. But no one answers.

Lakshmi holds the receiver to her chest. She sits like that for a long while. She finally puts the phone down, hoping that Jyoti Rana will return her call. But deep down Lakshmi knows that her friend will never call her.

## FIRST DIVISION

Buwa sat on the verandah, warming his toes in the morning sun. The neighbor's pots and pans clattered as if they were quarreling. Somewhere in the building, a baby wailed insufferably. Buwa closed his eyes and dreamt that he was the landlord of a big house, with servants tending the garden. To gain his favor, people lined up outside the gate with imported Red Label. The flattery annoyed Buwa, so he kept them waiting while he relaxed in his bathtub. The bathroom filled up with steam; Buwa dictated the lunch menu to Madhuri Dixit, his bejeweled secretary. Noticing that she had misspelled "mutton pulao" Buwa ordered Madhuri to take her blouse off. Her head bowed, Madhuri turned around and requested him to unhook the strap. "Please," she said. Buwa emerged from the soapy water, then a ripe guava fell with a thud in the garden.

Buwa opened his eyes. A fly was buzzing around his nose. As he waved at the insect, the Michael Jackson noise erupted from Kumar's room. The noise was loud enough to shatter a jar of pickles. Buwa walked over to his son's room. He banged on the door. "Stop this nonsense," he said, raising his voice above the loud music.

"It's Metallica," Kumar said without opening the door.

"If you fail to secure first division marks in S.L.C., what will you do? Dance like Michael Jackson?" Buwa asked. He waited for a response. After testing his father's patience for a few more minutes, Kumar finally lowered the volume.

Back in the veranda, Buwa watered the money plant whose stem looped around the

railing. The future of his son weighed on his mind. He hoped that in a few months Kumar's high school certificate would hang in a frame in the living room. The boy's future depended on the words "First Division" etched in shining letters on the document, but Kumar lacked lofty aims. Buwa was troubled by the thought that he may have been ineffective as a father. He wished he had a more commanding personality. Someone like Regmi, his younger colleague at the Ministry of Electricity. Regmi spoke with such confidence. He even dyed his hair red, inspiring coy looks from Shruti Singh. The job of leafing through bills and memos was so tedious, a bashful smile from Shruti Singh would surely brighten up Buwa's day, but the woman saved her compliments for the younger Regmi whose red hair shone like fire in their dingy office.

"Lost in your dreams again?" Ama said, bringing two glasses of lemon tea. Twenty-five years as a housewife had formed deep lines on her palms and cracks on her soles.

Buwa took his cup and lit a cigarette. "It is your love that has spoiled him," he said. Ama sat on the landing, making her grocery list on a crumpled piece of paper.

"When I was half his age, Baba beat me with a cane to make sure I studied for S.L.C.," Buwa said. "And your son has started smoking also. Have you noticed how dark his lips are?"

"My son will never smoke," Ama replied without looking up from her grocery list.

"Of course. You think he is a prince."

"Why don't you quit? One smoker is bad enough at home."

"Please be serious," Buwa said as the ring of a phone interrupted them. It was Priya, Kumar's married sister. "I am blamed for everything that happens in this house," Ama complained to her daughter, but Buwa knew the words were aimed at him. He took a long drag before tapping the cigarette to break the ash.

Later in the kitchen Ama removed a steaming pot of rice from the kerosene stove and put

it on the floor before her husband. Buwa, sitting crossed-legged on a pirka, waited for his wife to scoop up the rice with a ladle and serve him. He wouldn't start eating until his wife made a mound of rice for him and poured dal and vegetable over it. Squatting on her haunches, Ama poured rice on his plate, then called out to Kumar.

"I'm not hungry," Kumar shouted from his room. Buwa gave Ama a look. "Come, now. Your father means well," Ama said.

It annoyed Buwa to see Kumar's jeans torn at the knees. The young fellow's hair bristled like blades. Kumar sat on the pirka next to his father and without looking up, pulled his plate of rice toward him.

"Spoon," he muttered.

"Eating with spoon makes you thin," Ama said. She plopped a ladle of squash on his plate. Kumar crumpled his nose.

"If you don't score first division in S.L.C., you'll spend the rest of your days eating shit," Buwa said.

"Chee," Ama said.

"Why bother? I feel like doing that already," said Kumar.

"Your royal highness, very soon the fruits of life will rot before your eyes," Buwa replied. "If your grandfather was here, he would set you straight."

Ama put her hand to her mouth. "Eat now," she said.

≈

At work, Buwa sat at his desk, staring at an old file. He pulled the electric heater close to his feet. Since one of the coils was not working, the glow was too faint to warm him, so he took his shoes off and rubbed his feet together.

“Do you want to go for tea?” he asked Regmi, seated behind a computer on his desk. Regmi shook his wrist to roll down the watch that was too big for him.

“What’s the hurry?” Regmi said. From his jacket, he fished out a small container. He took a pinch of khaini from the container, put the khaini in the pocket of his mouth, and spat out the scrapes that stuck to his lower lip. The khaini gave off a sharp smell, which clung to Regmi all day.

“Maybe the fragrance of your khaini will pull Shruti-Ji to you, no?” Buwa said.

“Shruti-Ji is a happily married woman. Why do you say such things?”

“Just joking. Don’t mind hai, bhai?” Buwa said, attempting a smile.

When Shruti Singh walked in, wearing a bright red sari, a pair of sunglasses perched on her head, Buwa opened his file. Shruti Singh adjusted her shawl, and Buwa noticed the tiny sweat patches under her armpits.

“Your husband must have dropped you off on his motorcycle?” Buwa said.

“We are soon buying a car. Shekhar got a promotion,” she said. She turned on the computer on her desk, which she had inherited from the previous clerk, who, like Buwa’s current younger colleagues, had a college degree and had moved up, leaving Buwa as the only long-term resident in the meter-regulation section.

Regmi pulled a chair and sat next to Shruti Singh. “Solitaire or Chess?” he asked.

“What difference does it make? You’re such a cheat, Regmi-Ji.”

“Hoina Shruti-Ji, when will I have the pleasure of playing paplu with you?” Buwa chimed in.

“First learn to use the calculator, Sharma-Ji,” Regmi said and Shruti Singh laughed with him.

“Isn’t your son taking the S.L.C next month?” Shruti Singh asked Buwa.

“He is,” Regmi interrupted, “so is my nephew. Top class student, my nephew. He will score first division with his left hand.”

“Is it even possible to score anything lower than a first division these days?” Shruti Singh said.

A prolonged silence followed. Regmi stretched his arms.

“Join us for tea Sharma-Ji?” he asked.

“I have some calculations to finish,” Buwa said.

“Do it well, hai? Someone might evaluate your work,” said Regmi.

“Stop it now. Poor man,” Shruti Singh said.

Buwa watched her as she left. Despite being a young mother Shruti Singh had maintained her figure quite well.

Buwa lit a half-stubbed cigarette. He worried that the goat sacrifice at Dakshinkali hadn’t worked. Buwa had drawn six thousand from his retirement saving for the slaughter, meant to ward off bad omen from Kumar’s kundali. At this age Buwa had only one wish: to see his son get into a good college, be a first-class officer someday, an owner of a house. But Buwa’s son was attracted to a life of misfortune, always failing in math and science. Buwa crossed his legs on the chair and dreamt that he was a first-class officer. He would have a personal office, a plaque on the door to indicate whether he was “in” or “out.” Out meant people had to wait on a long bench for him to arrive. He would sign documents with three different pens, his grand signature deciding the fate of hundreds of people. At the touch of a bell, the peon would scramble to his door, followed closely by the driver who would be sent to fetch Shruti madam from her manicure appointment. They would go to cocktail parties, she by his side, wearing

expensive jewelry from Dubai.

Buwa stubbed his cigarette on the broken coil of the electric heater. He looked at the file on his desk and opened it with a yawn.

That evening, as usual, Shruti Singh's husband came to pick her up. He brought their son along, a tired-looking boy in school uniform. The boy wore glasses with cheap plastic frames. Buwa had suggested buying the poor boy a new pair of glasses. "Good manners are what matters at his age," Shruti Singh had replied, typically disregarding the voice of experience. What did she find in that awkward-looking husband of hers, Buwa wondered.

The husband paced the narrow room up and down like an animal in a cage, not bothering to take off his helmet.

"Is something troubling your mind?" Buwa asked him light-heartedly.

"Just thinking about important office matters," the man said. He turned to his wife and asked, "still not ready?"

Shruti Singh held up a small mirror and slowly applied lipstick across her top and bottom lip. Regmi was pretending to read a newspaper. He lowered the newspaper to peek at Shruti Singh. Then Regmi pretended to read again. *Taking your chances, you fraud*, Buwa thought. Buwa silently mocked the husband who seemed occupied with thoughts of his own misery, perhaps hiding a bald patch under that helmet. After Shruti Singh finally gathered her belongings, Buwa remembered that he had bought a gift for her son. "Wait, wait," he said. He took out a Five Star chocolate from his drawer.

"For you," he said to the boy. Shruti Singh rolled her eyes. The boy sprang forward and grabbed the chocolate, causing Buwa to marvel at his alertness.

"Very sharp boy," Buwa said. He ruffled the boy's hair.

Say “thank you,” Shruti Singh told her son.

“Thank you,” the boy said, his fingers already covered in chocolate.

Buwa smacked his lips in the air.

“You spoil him so much, Sharma-ji,” Shruti Singh said. She actually smiled at Buwa. The significance of this moment was not lost on him. He groped for the right words before saying, “please allow me this small luxury.” But Shruti Singh was already out the door.

That evening, Ama was bent over the sewing machine, which took up space in the corner of their room.

Buwa lay in bed.

“What is it?” Ama said. Even with her hand on the wheel and eyes fixed on those patterns, she knew what he was thinking.

Buwa took a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and waved at a fly. “Whatever your opinion may be, Baba’s strict ways were good for me,” he said. He wiped his forehead with the hanky. “I did well in Nepali and math. After Baba passed away, I became champion in smoking and teasing girls. And how old was I? Twelve, thirteen? What good came of that?”

Ama made no reply. The rhythmic sound of the machine filled the silence. “It’s not right,” she finally said. “You never speak of your father without remembering how strict he was.”

“He was equally loving, mind you. He would grab my hair and lift me until tears rolled down our eyes, his and mine.” Buwa paused, and said, “Then I had to sit on the floor, with a straight spine. He’d pour mustard oil on my scalp and rub it with his fingers, ending with the words, ‘Fight your own weaknesses before you conquer the world.’” Buwa took a deep breath.

“All I know is that you always quarrel with Kumar but have nothing to say to him.”

“I needed a strict hand to guide me. Kumar is the same. We’re similar that way.”

“And loving? Caring?”

“When has he ever given me the chance to show it?”

“Constantly scolding him is the solution then?”

“It is known as discipline. It was taken away from me when Baba passed away.”

“Then what is the difference between you and the school principle?”

Buwa was in no mood to argue with his wife. He turned to face the wall.

Ama resumed stitching table clothes and pillow covers, which she sold for a small price to the neighbors.

The machine rattled late into the night. Buwa shut his ears and tried to sleep.

≈

Next morning, Buwa was up at five. He wrapped himself in a thick blanket and banged on Kumar’s door.

“Kumar...eh Kumar, get up, it’s time for your tuition classes.” His voice broke the stillness of the morning. Somewhere, a neighbor’s toilet flushed, discharging water through the drainage pipe. “Kumar, get up, I said.” The thumps got louder prompting Kumar to finally say, “Let me sleep for two more minutes.”

“You will miss your class.”

“Two more minutes.”

“Get up, I said.”

When Kumar didn’t emerge, Buwa shook the doorknob, unhooking the latch. He walked in and yanked away the quilt that enveloped his son. “I spend nine hundred every month for this?” he said. Kumar pulled up the quilt again. He wrapped himself in the thickness of the

fabric, clutching the end so firmly Buwa was unable to snatch it away. Buwa knew this game well. He pulled the other end of the quilt, exposing his son's feet to the sharp morning chill. Kumar finally sat up, looking straight into his father's eyes. Buwa was gripped by a sudden rage. He slapped his son; the fingers struck the bone below the eye. Kumar stood, face to face with his father. Buwa played with his shirt button. Not knowing what else to do, he left the room.

“What happened?” Ama asked.

Buwa's hand was trembling. He slid it under the blanket.

“What did you do to him?”

When no answer came out of his mouth, she said, “Your father's beatings couldn't get you a college degree, could it?”

“I am a government officer. I have managed to marry my daughter off to a respectable family,” he said.

Ama went to her son's room. “It's okay, now, don't create a fuss,” Buwa heard her say.

“He can't bully me anymore,” Kumar said. The voice pierced through the wall that separated the two rooms. A few minutes later, Kumar was out of the house. If it hadn't been so cold, Buwa would have stealthily followed his son, for he was sure Kumar never went for his tuition classes.

Buwa sat down. For a moment he'd felt a sharp pain on his fingers. He clutched both hands firmly under the blanket.

Now, it was Ama's turn. She dialed her daughter's number.

“I feel like I have to take care of two children at home,” she complained to Priya. Holding the mouthpiece between her ear and shoulder while she rubbed the dry flakes off her palm, Ama then listened to her daughter's advice, or more likely, to Priya's own mutterings

about trivial matters. Judging by the signs, Buwa knew his morning tea wasn't forthcoming. *Fate beckons me to a teashop*, he thought. He went to his room. He picked out a faded jacket from the cupboard hanger. The patch that Ama had sown under the elbow had come loose again, exposing the threads. No matter, Buwa put it on and left the house.

The street basked in the glow of the breaking dawn. Some people huddled around burning trash; a woman with a baby wrapped on her back swept the sidewalk. Instead of going to a teashop, Buwa took an unexpected turn.

The long alley leading to the temple was busy with devotees and morning-walkers. Beggars lined the side of the street, clanking their tins; next to them flower sellers, weaving strands of marigold, dangled fresh garlands to tempt Buwa, but he walked past, eager to get inside the temple.

In the courtyard, he sat on a bench. He couldn't remember the last time he was here. He watched the devotees circling the shrines barefoot. They had mastered the art of ignoring monkeys who hung from pillars, eyeing an easy target to snatch food from. Buwa lit a cigarette; its smoke blending into the morning fog. When the conch was blown in the main shrine, accompanied by chiming bells, it set off a flock of pigeons into the sky, but did little to clear Buwa's mind. Why didn't Kumar ever fear him? He constantly defied Buwa's effort to set him on the right course. Buwa knew his son had no affection for him. From his mother Kumar had learned how to brood and show defiance, and Buwa found it more and more difficult to communicate with his son. Buwa knew that he wasn't made up of the same solid steel as his father. Buwa had seen the defiance on Kumar's face that morning. Even at such a young age, Kumar's anger had hardened into his skin. What would Buwa do if Kumar slapped him back?

When a pujari tapped him on the shoulder, Buwa stood up with a fright.

“Oh, I thought you were...” Buwa said, attempting a smile. The dhoti-clad pujari smeared a long tika on Buwa’s forehead and walked along briskly, chanting a sloka, toward other people milling about at the temple courtyard.

Buwa sat down on the bench again. Sometimes he thought Baba might emerge from behind, carrying the smell of talcum powder on old skin. The more Buwa feared the beatings, the more he would crave them, and when Baba put his arms around him and they cried together, Buwa knew that his father loved him a lot. He would sit on his father’s lap, not scared to run his finger along the veins of those big hands.

Buwa bent to pick up a pebble. He rolled the pebble in his fingers wondering if Ama may have been right about talking to Kumar. Listening to Kumar’s *views* about life. Buwa smiled. He threw the pebble at a monkey, failing to arouse any reaction from the animal. Buwa had read somewhere that monkey balls were a delicacy in Africa. This thought made him chuckle. At that moment, he saw Shruti Singh come out of the main shrine. Dark glasses shielded her eyes, and her head was draped in a shawl, but there was no doubt it was her. She walked fast. “Shruti-Ji,” Buwa called out. She stopped for an instant to look at him, then resumed walking faster. “It’s me,” Buwa said. He scurried behind, pushing through the swelling crowd. “Hello? Shruti-Ji, it’s me,” he said. She kept walking. Just as he was about to catch her, she slipped inside a waiting taxi. In it was Regmi, the red hair visible through the rear window. The taxi sped off before Buwa could reach it.

His head heavy, Buwa walked back home. A married woman never went to a temple with another man. Despite Buwa’s many attempts to tease Regmi about Shruti Singh, the man always acted superior. How long had this been going on? Did Shruti Singh’s husband know? Did Shruti Singh and Regmi secretly laugh at Buwa’s innocence? Did they mock him behind his back for

his simple ways? Buwa was so angry he felt like wringing Regmi's neck with his bare hands until the man shook violently like a fish without oxygen. So absorbed was Buwa in this thought, he almost walked into an oncoming tempo. The driver stuck his head out and called him "a useless old man."

"You look lost. Is anything the matter?" a neighbor inquired outside the building.

"Fighting with your son again?"

"Mind your own business," Buwa said.

"What is your problem?" The man said. "Motherfucker."

When Buwa reached the flat, he said to Ama, "I don't feel like going to work today."

She left the room.

"I don't want to fight," he said. "Please don't argue with me."

She came back, touched his forehead. "No fever," she said.

"I want to rest, please," he said.

She brought him lemon tea. They sat on the bed together. "Kumar is no longer a child. Beating him won't solve anything," she said.

"I don't know how to handle him," he said. He placed his hand on top of hers. She looked at him. He gently rubbed her finger.

"I'm scared he'll make the same mistakes I made."

"Times have changed. You must talk to your son, not point finger all the time. Do you care to know what goes through his mind?"

Buwa sighed. "There is so much corruption in the world. So much betrayal," he said.

"Your heart is heavy today," she said. "Go talk to him. He's back. Sulking in his room."

"Talk about what?"

“Say sorry.”

“You have lost your mind.”

She took his tea from him. “Go,” she said.

He grabbed the cup, but she firmly held onto it, causing the hot tea to spill between his legs and form the map of Sri Lanka.

“Why did you hit him?” She asked.

“Nonsense,” he said and left the room.

Buwa knocked on his son’s door. “Always locked from inside. What do you do in there so secretly?” he asked.

When this did not elicit a response, Buwa squeezed the doorknob, then banged louder. “How do we know you’re still alive?” he said. Kumar didn’t respond, so Buwa kept banging louder.

“One minute,” Kumar finally said.

While he waited for his son to open the door, Buwa felt a lump in his throat. Somewhere in the building, a nail was being hammered into a wall, causing the whole building to tremble.

## AMERICA

The morning of the interview for my American visa, I spend more time in front of the mirror than usual. The black coat especially tailored for this occasion matches my white shirt. I apply Brylcreem in my hair and comb it with a neat part on the side.

“Wear your father’s blue tie,” mother says. “Shall I get it for you?” She walks nervously between the kitchen and the living room, carrying a plate of alu-chiura, urging me to eat something, but I refuse because of the uneasy grumblings in my stomach.

“Sanjay is going to America, Muwa. Far, far away!” mother says to Granny who sits on a string cot pushed against the wall in the corner. Granny’s tiny feet dangle high above the floor and she sways gently, grunting and mumbling to herself.

Meanwhile father returns from his morning walk. Behind him is Bhandari uncle, our neighbor and father’s morning-walk partner. Unlike father who goes for his walks in regular cotton shirt, trousers, and rubber slippers, Bhandari uncle wears a track suit with a pair of original Reeboks that his brother sent from America. A mobile phone is always attached to the waistband of his trousers, and when his brother calls, Bhandari uncle speaks loudly by holding the phone in front of his mouth. His brother has a green card. Though Bhandari uncle has never been to America himself, he is the closest anyone in the neighborhood has come to the country.

“So, going to America?” Bhandari uncle says. He sits on one of our cushioned chairs without taking his shoes off.

“I’m only going for my visa interview today. Have to pass this first.” I check my bag once again to make sure all my papers are ready.

“Give him your blessings, dai,” says mother, bringing cups of tea for father and Bhandari uncle.

“Your son has to put on a good impression. Only exceptional candidates will get the visa,” Bhandari uncle says.

Father sits on a nylon stool, cracking the bones of his toes. “I am not worried,” he says. “My son is fluent in English, so no one can question his intelligence. And let’s not forget—he has earned a scholarship.”

“Bob Smith Jr. Scholarship,” I add. “Offered to select international students at Silver Lake College.”

“These foreigners have a soft heart for third-world countries,” Bhandari uncle says. “What is the amount of the scholarship?” he asks.

“20% of education costs. They’ll increase it even further after a year,” father says.

“That may be so, but you see, Americans are clever,” says Bhandari uncle and sips his tea. “They want outsiders to study in their colleges, then work cheaper than the whites. A shrewd race of people. And listen, learn to drive as soon as you go there. No one walks in America.” He turns to father. “In California, police will catch you if you walk on the highways,” he says.

“Only if you j-walk,” I add.

Father turns to Bhandari uncle, pointing at me with a flick of his eyebrows. “Fully prepared,” he says and smiles. “Tell uncle what j-walking means. We old men don’t understand your American words.”

“J-walking? It just means walking without following rules,” I say. Bhandari uncle takes out his mobile phone from its leather case. He wipes the phone with his sleeve and punches numbers with one finger.

“My six-year-old nephew knows all the rules. He even follows them,” Bhandari uncle finally says. He keeps looking at the phone prompting father to ask if he got a call from America. Bhandari uncle shakes his head.

“Speaking of rules, Nepal has become the lawless wonder of the world,” father says. He pulls out a folded tabloid from his trouser-pocket. “Water pump scam! These politicians are sucking Nepal dry. See Bhandari-ji, our son is the front wheels of a car and we are the rear wheels. After he settles in America we will eventually follow,” father adds, waving the rolled tabloid.

From her room, mother brings a crisp handkerchief sprayed with a dash of Old Spice. She folds the handkerchief and puts in my pocket. She also picks out a loose thread from my coat. “Why don’t you relax?” I tell her. Shaking her head, mother goes to the kitchen.

“By the way, what is the name of that young fellow from your office?” Bhandari uncle asks father, putting his phone back in its leather case. “Shrestha’s cousin. Is it true he got that promotion you always wanted?”

Father takes off his shirt and rolls it into a bundle. The collar is black on the inside. He wipes his neck with the shirt, then throws it in the corner. With legs crossed, father cleans his glasses with his vest. “What to do dai?” he says with a heavy sigh. “The young fellow had

connections that I didn't. There's a rumor that Shrestha went all the way up to the minister, greasing every palm along the way."

"Shrestha is smart that way."

"Openly corrupt. That is what he is. I am happy that my son is going to a country where success is based on merit."

"Merit alone won't take you far. One must also be street smart," Bhandari uncle says.

Father shakes his head.

No one talks for a while.

I check my inner coat pocket to make sure I have my passport.

"Whatever little saving we had, we invested in Sanjay's application," mother says, breaking the silence. She sits on the floor, removing stems from spinach leaves. "If destiny favors us, even Muwa will live the last years of her life in prosperity." Mother looks at me.

"Dog shit," Granny says, bunching her fist. Bhandari uncle laughs. Mother gives father a quick glance. I walk over and kneel beside Granny. She places her trembling hand on mine. "Go and play," she says. I give her arm a gentle rub which brings sleep to her eyes.

"Listen," Bhandari uncle says to me. "Take my brother's name at the interview. Today Kamal has name and fame in America. If they have doubts, I will talk to them personally. Tell them to call me."

Father looks uneasily at me.

"You think too much," Bhandari uncle tells father, handing him a business card which he pulls out from his wallet. "For your son's sake, learn to take advantage of opportunities," he says, getting up to leave. Mother asks what's the hurry and if he would sit for another cup of tea.

“Nothing less than goat meat for the celebration,” he says with a laugh. Father buttons up a fresh shirt and accompanies him out.

I look at my watch—it’s time to go. I gently pry away Granny’s fingers, which are clasped around my wrist. I get up, straighten my coat. When father returns, he slips the business card into my pocket. “Just in case,” he says and I don’t argue. He puts a hundred-rupee bill in my hand for the taxi. “Don’t take the tempoo and reach there all sweaty,” he says.

From the kitchen, mother brings a tray filled with wick lamps and circles it in front of my face. I bow my head for blessings, then touch Granny’s feet that are bunched together, like a tiny sack of wrinkles. She opens her eyes and runs her fingers over my face, mumbling a prayer for every part of me she touches. “Going to school?” she asks.

I hesitate to answer, but mother says, “Far away.”

“Check all your documents,” father says, which I do. When mother embraces me, I can feel her beating heart. “Ama, it’s okay,” I tell her.

“Go, you’ll be late,” she says, turning away.

In the alley, father walks ahead of me. Before I get into a taxi, he pats my shoulder. “No need to worry too much; we are already proud of you,” he says.

“Of course, Baba, I know,” I say.

≈

The taxi driver is napping in the back seat. The ripped seat covers smell of sweat. He seems bitter for having to wake up from his nap. As he drives through the crowded street, I look out at the twisted electric wires, looped around poles and trees, entangled in knots, hanging between houses that are gray with dust. We pass by the marble soda shop. The marble rattles in the bottle when you drink the fizzy soda that comes in orange and blue. I still remember: after I

had turned six, father had taught me how to press down the marble with my thumb to pop open the bottle, something I'd been waiting to do for a whole year. It was a rainy day. We stood under the awning of the soda shop. Holding the bottle under my chin, I pushed the marble with a single stroke prompting the fizz to rise and the marble to rattle in the dent of the neck. "Drink, drink," father said, laughing, making me drink straight from the bottle. Our drinks savored, we walked back in the rain, two grown men huddled under an umbrella.

"Fifty rupees in the pocket. Should I save that for petrol or potato, you tell me?" the driver asks. A frayed toothbrush hangs from a string tied to the rear-view mirror. He looks at me. "Too much luck crammed in your forehead," he says.

"It's hard work also."

"Really? How so?"

"It wasn't planned when I think of it," I say. "I won a debate in school. The topic was 'Freedom for Tomorrow's Society.' My prize was a poster of the Statue of Liberty. Surely, you have heard of this world-famous statue?"

He doesn't say anything.

"Anyway, it's a 3-D poster. The torch glows in the dark, illuminating the whole room. Father would bring his friends over just to show them the poster. We all knew it was a calling."

"Everything in life is luck. You have it or you don't."

"Then, of course, the never ending application process. Hard work, but brainy work. Spending hours in the library. And let's not forget the TOEFL exam. Not everyone can do it."

The driver drums his fingers on the steering wheel, driving silently, looking at me every now and then through the mirror.

“Have you no shame?” he suddenly asks. “Will you be able to sleep at night knowing you deserted your wounded mother?”

“Mother?”

“In America, you’ll even buy a TV for your bathroom, but will you send one paisa back to the country that raised and fed you? Of course not! Selfish people like you have ruined our country.”

I open my bag and pull out a document with prospective questions. The man goes on and on. I ask him to stop, which he does, and drives off yelling a seven-generation curse, not even bothering to return the change.

Abandoned on the side of the street, I start frantically waving for a ride. The summer dust and smoke immediately cling to my clothes. I tell myself that by this time next month, I’ll be in Wisconsin. I wave at passing vehicles, even rub my thumb and forefinger, although I barely have more than a few rupees in my wallet. People look at me as if there’s something abnormal in my behavior, but drive on. I pace up and down the street. Finally I see a wobbly motorcycle at a distance whose driver is waving back at me. The motorcycle meanders away from the noisy traffic.

“Where to?” the man asks as the motorbike sputters to a halt. He has a little girl in front and a boy behind him. A stack of iron rods is harnessed to the carrier, leaving barely any space for an extra person.

“U.S. Embassy,” I tell him, squeezing in. “Please hurry. I have a visa interview.” The man accelerates causing the pipes to clatter.

A jute satchel is strapped to the shoulder of the boy. A coarse smell reeks from the satchel.

A few minutes later, the boy says, “Important interview, uncle? Would you like to sample our combs?”

To prevent his oily hair from staining my shirt, I put my bag in front of me.

“Show uncle some varieties,” says the man, turning back his head. His helmet bounces every time the motorbike hits a pothole. The boy takes out several combs from his satchel, each one a different color and size, and holds them like a row of cards.

“Pocket comb, plastic comb, blue, green, yellow. How many will you take today?”

I feel like laughing. “A shop on two wheels?” I ask.

“I’ll throw in a pocket mirror if you buy all five,” the boy says.

“I’ll take the blue one, no more,” I say and he puts it into my coat pocket.

“What are these pipes for?” I ask him.

“We are helping build a community school near Trishuli,” the father says. “Voluntary work, once a week. Government provides material. We move these parts and set them up. You may have read about the school: Ganatantra Bright Future: the first rural school in the district with plans to use computers in every classroom. It was in the papers last week.”

“I wish I had the time to read the news.”

“A tall ambition, but things are moving ahead with everyone’s support. Donors, community members, even the government has stepped up.”

“You’re not scared to take your children to hilly areas?”

“They should see such things. That is my personal belief, but only during summer holidays. And my son does business on the side, so we don’t starve,” he says and laughs. “We have a comb shop in Kalimati. Beauty combs. You must bring your future American wife someday.” Even the boy laughs hearing this.

I thank them when we arrive at the embassy. As I reach for my wallet, the father stops me. “The comb is a small gift from us,” he says. “When you return with great education from America, that will be your gift to us,” he says.

They drive away waving, as I watch them weave through the heavy traffic.

I finally turn around. There it is, the magnificent embassy, with enormous walls and hi-fi gadgets on the roof, towering over the street like a twenty-first century mountain. Most passersby stop briefly to look at it before moving on. The guard shoos me away.

“Visa appointment,” I tell him.

“Your face is dusty. Wash it first,” he says, pointing to a roadside tap about fifty meters away. I hurry. Gathering water in the cup of my palms, I gently splash my face, then scrub it with the handkerchief. I take out the comb and smoothen out the curls in my hair. I don’t want to throw away the comb, but carrying a sharp object might arouse untoward suspicion. I run my finger over its brisling teeth, then decide to hide it under a brick at the foot of the tap.

On the walk back to the embassy, I think about the motorcycle family. I’ve come to admire people like them. How happy they seem, pursuing humble ambitions; a family-run shop and a weekend hobby that instills good values in the children. So different from my own situation. With an English-medium education, there is no prospect for me in this country. My aspirations have always been on a different scale, and the letter from Silver Lake College has confirmed that. But I remind myself that I should never *ever* forget my roots, and someday give back in a big way.

After a thorough body search and inspection of my belongings, I’m let inside the grand building. The first thing I notice is the absolute silence. The traffic noise cannot reach this far. In

the air-conditioned waiting room, our footprints dissolve in the carpet. President Obama's smiling portrait hangs on the wall. This is his territory.

We applicants are dressed in our best—men in double-breasted suits, women weighed down by jewelry. It looks like we're all part of the groom's procession at a wedding. Two big-chested Nepali security guards walk their Alsatian dogs that seem capable of sniffing out those who twitch and fret too much. We all sit stiff and smile at the dogs as they pass by us. Soon the air is filled with nervous murmurs. People share notes of what the Americans might throw at us. When their names are called out from a speaker on the wall, the applicants proceed to the interview booths, their shoulders stooped with worry.

The man sitting next to me nudges me with his elbow.

"Final destination?" he whispers. Three gold rings decorate his pudgy fingers and his forehead is smeared with a long tika.

"Silver Lake College, Wisconsin."

"Big city?"

"No, It's a state. Gained statehood in 1848 after the Black Hawk War."

He nods, assessing my face. "You'll get it," he says. "My case is more complicated. I need a tourist visa. There my friends will get me a lawyer, and I'll apply for a green card." Leaning closer, he covers his mouth with his palm. "But tough after September 11 of 2001. That is why I hate Bin Laden."

"You'll live illegally in America?"

"It's normal in New York," he says. He puts his hand on my shoulder. "Rent an apartment with five/six people from this part of the world, and drive taxis. I have it all worked out."

I stir my shoulder. He removes his hand. “New suit?” he asks.

“What if they catch you living illegally?” I say.

“I’ve detected the loopholes in their so-called hi-fi rules,” he whispers. He looks here and there, then opens his briefcase that has gold-plated locks and pulls out a bank statement that shows him to be an owner of a three-star hotel.

“The trick is to reveal bit by bit. If they’re doubtful of my return, I’ll show them this. Why would a hotel owner drive taxis in New York, no?”

“Forged document?” I ask, which prompts a cunning smile from him.

I look the other way.

“Raj KC,” the speaker calls out. The man takes out an idol of Ganesh from his pocket and touches it on his forehead and chest a few times. “I will put thousand rupees at your feet,” he says and carries forth for business.

Most people who return from the interview complain that the interviewer is a monster—too tough. The few lucky ones walk back with their chins up, generating looks of awe and jealousy all around. They are asked to wait while the declined lot is sent out immediately. I try to ignore this and mentally revise key facts about Wisconsin, but just as you’d expect, I draw a blank on the names of some important towns—is Muscoda the dairy capital or the toilet paper capital of the world? What if I mix up the two? I sway back and forth in my seat. The taxi driver’s curse keeps playing in my mind. After a while I take out Bhandari uncle’s business card and turn it around a few times, then read it again, running my fingers over the glossy letters:

*Eastern Handicrafts and Millennium Entrepreneurs. 1515 Dwight St. San Diego, California. 92182. We Mean Business!*

“Impossible,” Raj says, returning. He wipes the sweat on his brow with his shirtsleeve.

“Take my advice, go back home,” he says.

I pretend to be busy in my thoughts. A guard with a walkie-talkie comes and tells Raj he can't sit there. Raj quietly follows the guard to the door.

When my turn comes, I take a deep breath. With a smile, I walk to the booth.

A glass partition separates the interviewer from me. A woman. She looks like a Nepali. In fact, the brass nameplate on his desk confirms it: Julie Pokhrel. A miniature U.S. flag is pinned to her coat.

“How're you doing this morning?” She speaks into a thin mike in a voice that booms with an American twang. Behind her, star and striped cloth covers the wall.

“Fine, thank you, madam,” I say, taking my seat, but the mike doesn't catch my voice, so I say it again.

“You're the guy with a mini scholarship to the Badger state?” she says.

I hand my folder to her through a small hole in the glass. The air-conditioning is turned very high, but I've come prepared with three layers of vests underneath my shirt.

“So, why the United States? Australia, England—there are other countries to go to.” She looks at me over the rim of her rectangular glasses.

I clear my throat.

“Madam, two reasons. First of all, as you know, your great country is the melting pot on earth. Its greatness lies in stirring hope in the hearts of those who dare to dream.”

I wait for a response but she wets her thumb, leafing through my documents. She holds a sheet of transcript against the light.

“Go on,” she says.

“Madam, the second reason is that I may be only one of those millions, but through hard work, I aim to convert my own little dream into reality, thereby, not only building the foundation of my own life, but contributing to the progress of Nepal upon my return.”

“Don’t you think Nepal needs young people like you? Now, more than ever?”

“Young people with world class education who can return to make a true difference. Like Socrates said, ‘education is the kindling of a flame.’ Our society will light up with the torch of our education, ma’am...sorry, I meant madam.”

“Yet your TOEFL score is rather average. Only 102.”

“As you well know, the famous quote by ex-president George W. Bush: ‘America is the land of the second chance—and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life.’”

She twiddles a pen in her fingers.

“Wisconsin, huh? Geez. Freeze. So, why the W?”

“Madam, besides being the birthplace of Thornton Wilder, my favorite author, Wisconsin, as you know, is also the home of the Green Bay Packers. Big fan.”

“How do you now about *them*?”

“I’ve read about their history, and know the names of all their legends. Lombardi, Favre, Rodgers.”

“Wait, did you just say Favre?” She leans back in his chair and laughs.

Her laughter booms from the mike, from the walls. Then she bends closer until his nose almost presses against the glass. “Faaarve. Let the R swell.”

“Faaarve,” I repeat. My voice sounds strange on the mike. I look around to see if anyone’s watching

“And where did you see a football game?”

“I haven’t seen one, yet,” I say.

“Not even on TV?”

“No,” I say with a smile. “Reserving the pleasure for once I get there, madam.”

“You want to be American right here, right now, don’t you?” When she says that, her accent suddenly slips into Nepali.

I smile. She quickly avoids my eyes.

“Your scholarship is rather small. Who’ll pay for your education?” The American voice is back, fuller, stronger.

“We’ll manage, madam.”

“How?”

“My parents are very supportive, madam. As is evidenced in the papers,” I say and point to the documents declaring father’s lifetime savings and the valuation of mother’s jewelry. “In fact, my mother is ready to sell all her jewelry and find work as a cook after I leave.” The last line is perhaps uncalled for, but seeing that she’s a Nepali woman, I find the courage to share a family secret.

“English major. Impressive. Who’s your favorite author?”

“Next to Mr. Wilder, the great Edgar Allen Poe, madam.”

“Can you recite a line from something he wrote?”

“I’ll try my best, madam.” I look at the ceiling and proceed:

“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary.

Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,

While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping...”

“That’s good,” she says, raising her hand. She looks intently at me, then drums her fingers on the armchair as if she’s half considering my case.

Moments of silence pass between us. The suspense is unbearable.

“Madam, the theme of the poem is mourning, which the poet wonderfully illustrates with...”

“That’s good,” she says. “Very impressive, I must say.”

I smile.

She gets up from his seat and goes to a corner where she pours water into a small plastic cup from a cooler, but instead of drinking the water she dabs a paper napkin into it and starts wiping her glasses. I am watching her. I wonder if I should pull out the business card. I unbutton my coat pocket and just as I feel the sharp edge of the card on my finger, she walks back, her gaze fixed on me.

Before she sits, she slams the rejection stamp on my passport.

“I admire your hard work,” she says. “But the severe lack of funding compels me to deny you at this point. Education in America is very expensive, and your scholarship doesn’t meet the minimum threshold.”

My mouth goes dry. “Madam, madam,” I try, but no words come out of me, trapped as they are in my chest.

“I need to show you something, madam,” I say and slip the business card through the hole. “This man has a green card in America. His own brother is like an uncle to me. They have promised to sponsor me. I will work very hard and will never disappoint you.”

“Sorry.” She slides the card back. “I’m just following the rules.”

A voice explodes from deep within myself. “Who do you think you are? I need to talk to a real American,” I tell her.

She presses a buzzer, not a hint of emotion in her face. A security guard takes me aside to the long line that is filing out like children expelled from class.

≈

The dust on the road at once ages my black shoes. I walk, and keep walking in no particular direction. A micro tempoo stops for me. I sit on its crowded bench. The man next to me is holding onto a wire tied to a railing, reading a newspaper cupped into his palm. His sweat has a sharp smell which mingles with the smell of mustard hair oil reeking from other passengers. More and more people cram in until that my face is squeezed against the man’s shoulder.

“Such is life, brother,” he says.

“I’m different,” I tell him.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I say as the tempoo puttters along.

I get off at a random place and consider going back to the embassy. But they won’t let me in without a ticket. How will I face my parents now? Should I run away to India? I don’t even have money for the night bus.

≈

At home, mother is stitching a pillow cover while father walks around the room, his hands behind his back.

“You’re back? Do you want some tea?” mother says, trying to hide the anticipation in her voice.

All kinds of thoughts are racing in my head.

“Everything okay?” mother asks, covering her mouth with her sari.

“I got it,” I say with a smile. “Oh, I’m so relived and excited I don’t even know how to express it. I’m so happy, so happy.” The words tumble out uncontrollably.

Mother looks at my face. “You don’t look too happy.”

“I’m too excited to react, Ama. Really, I don’t know what to do. I’m so, just so...”

“It may be days before it finally sinks in,” father says. His taut wrinkles loosen to form their own little smiles. He takes off his glasses and wipes his eyes with his sleeves.

Granny mumbles something about being hungry.

Mother goes to the small alcove behind the kitchen, where idols of Shiva, Ganesh, and Parvati are neatly arranged on the cemented counter.

“How does the visa look, son? Let me see?” father says.

“I’ll get it tomorrow. They’ve asked me to collect it tomorrow. That’s the rule.”

“Unnecessary delays,” he murmurs, and feeling for some loose change in his pockets, he walks out the door but comes back immediately asking me if I am absolutely sure that I got it.

The prayer bell tinkles and the fragrance of incense smoke comes from the kitchen.

“Of course, Buwa,” I say. “Long interview. I’ll tell you everything later.”

He asks me to rest and walks out.

I go to my room and close the door.

My legs, unable to bear the burden any longer, start trembling.

In the living room, the celebration has started. I can hear them. Father has brought his friends, among whom Bhandari uncle’s voice is the loudest.

“I always knew he was special,” Bhandari uncle says. “Always thought of him like my own son. Tell him he can keep my brother’s business card. I have plenty more at home.”

I look out the window. It starts to rain. Vendors run around, covering their wares with plastic sheets. The rain inspires them to shout out their prices even louder.

“Where is the man of the moment?” someone asks.

“He’s taking a rest,” father says.

“Call him, call him,” Bhandari uncle says.

There is a loud knock. I open the door.

“Sanjay, Sanjay.” Granny’s voice is almost drowned out in the noise of the revelers. I go and sit next to her. She places her hand on my head.

“How was school?” she says. “Don’t study too hard. Children must play. Go and play.”

I look at her. “My beautiful child,” she says and smiles her toothless smile.

I smile too, until my eyelashes linger with tears, and when the drops fall, they fall steadily into Granny’s shoulder.

## AFTERWORD:

## THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE CHOICE IN POSTCOLONIAL FICTION

When asked why he writes in English, Chinese author Ha Jin said, “My decision to write in English was to exist” (23). Ha Jin was referring to the strict censorship laws in China which he claims compelled him to choose English to gain wider readership and “keep the integrity of my work” (23). At the time of writing this paper, I don’t have to worry about censorship laws of Nepal. Despite a volatile political climate, Nepal has enjoyed a vibrant and free press/literary culture in the last two decades.

A recent literary bestseller published out of Nepal in Nepali, *Palpasa Café*, is a fictional rendition of Nepal’s complex political history. It is also an exposè of the country’s climate of corruption. The novel has won numerous literary awards in the country. My point is that I wish I could make a neat and altruistic claim like Ha Jin. But I don’t have a concrete answer for why I choose English—it is certainly not for any fear of persecution. Perhaps the reason why I have chosen English as the language of my literary expression has something to do with my English-medium schooling, or with my love for English novels written by writers from around the world. When I write, I seem to naturally gravitate towards the English language. It isn’t just the language itself, but what it promises: the possibility of an escape. Salman Rushdie has eloquently written about émigré writers reclaiming what is lost by creating “imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (*Imaginary Homelands* 10). Rushdie says that writing in English allows him to

imagine India “through a kind of double perspective because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society” (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 19). I relate to that sentiment. The English language, I believe, gives me a keener perspective to discover the intrigue in what might otherwise be perceived as a mundane event/detail in Nepal. In my story “Pinky,” for example, a pet dog becomes a symbol of social status in a lower middle-class Kathmandu neighborhood, provoking anger and jealousy among the neighbors. The pet owners are ultimately compelled to abandon the pet for the greater good of maintaining a semblance of social harmony. Conceptualizing this story in English allowed me the perspective to discover the humor embedded in the story’s conflict. To the average western reader, the family’s dilemma of having to choose between a pet and social acceptability may seem strange, perhaps even absurd. The challenge for me, then, was to present the characters and their emotions without sensationalizing or belittling their experiences. Being a Nepali gave me the tools to recognize the familiarity of the situation, but presenting the details in English helped me discover the same situation with an outsider’s perspective. The “double perspective,” I hope, helps the story achieve both its melancholy and humor. Rushdie adds: “literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality” (*Imaginary Homelands* 15). English gives me the avenues to discover new angles with which to enter Nepali realities. Like R. K. Narayan, the flexibility of English also “allows me to communicate my experience through it” (23).

Nepal has never been a direct colony of a European empire. English trickled into our consciousness from Indian missionaries who set up English-medium schools in Kathmandu in the 1960’s. Indian institutions gave us a language that they first made into their own. Having been educated in an Indian-administered high school in Nepal, and subsequently in colleges in India, I too have made English my own, an English that attempts to carry the texture of Nepal’s

cultural and political history, which is simultaneously a history of non-colonization and neo-colonization; the latter because of Nepal's economic dependence on India and the overwhelming influence of India's technologies, cultural, and bureaucratic systems in Nepal. Kathmandu's tea shops are usually abuzz with how the Indian Embassy in the city wields more political clout than the prime minister's office, though, in typically political contrariety, that may never explain the rise of mainstream Maoism in Nepal. The larger point is that the English language wasn't imposed upon us as an instrument of direct colonialism and so the resistance against it was never strong. English came to us through educational channels—what Edward Said terms, “noncoercive institutions” (57). What English did within the Nepali society, however, was operate as an obvious marker of class division. English-medium schools are expensive, accessible mainly to the middle class population of Kathmandu. Consequently, English today is not the lingua franca of Nepali bureaucracy, but it is the aspirational language of a growing Nepali middle class.

Having grown up in a middle class family with access to English-language text books, I too recognized the significance of the English language early on. In our English-medium school, those students who spoke English with a degree of fluency and participated in debates were held in high esteem by their peers and teachers. I grew up believing that English was a measure of intelligence, an instrument for progress. I too became a dedicated student of the language, which, in turn, fostered my allegiance to English novels in later years. Today, as someone who writes in English, my relationship with the English language is rather complicated. I enjoy depicting Nepali lives in English, but I am mindful of the questions that I immediately confront with: if language shapes consciousness and culture, by using English, am I automatically internalizing and perpetuating a western view of Nepal? If so, is my attempt to domesticate the English

language by experimenting with diction and syntax also an act of political resistance? Should I bear an ethical responsibility to write in Nepali so that more people in Nepal can read my work? These are questions that I often struggle with. I don't situate myself in the tradition of postcolonial writing. I certainly don't write about the postcolonial experience, but that doesn't prevent me from engaging in the postcolonial debate about the English language. What I do share with Achebe, Ngugi, or Narayan is the choice of using English to convey the experiences of a non-English speaking milieu. I grapple with choices and concerns common to us all: should I add local flavor in the language? Should I integrate native words? Should I translate or transcreate a local idiom? Should I worry about misrepresentation or sensationalism, or be extra careful to not internalize and perpetuate stereotypes? My objective in exploring this debate is not to reach a definitive conclusion, but to remind us that "language is inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world" (Ngugi 15-16). It is against this backdrop that I will now attempt a critical analysis of the link between language and culture, or more specifically, between aesthetic choices and their ideological implications within the context of Anglophone postcolonial fiction. The debate is as relevant today as it ever has been—our aesthetic choices are instrumental in creating what Ngugi calls "the body of values" (15) by which our readers will perceive our characters and the societies they inhabit.

Over the years, various postcolonial writers and theorists have held disparate and often contentious views on the use/abuse/rejection of the imperial language as a vehicle of literary expression. Perhaps no two contemporary luminaries have engaged in an intellectual wrangle over this issue as contentiously as Ngugi wa Thiongo and Chinua Achebe have. Ngugi famously argued that African writers should reject imperial languages and write in African languages.

Achebe, on the other hand, was determined to use the language he inherited, but “alter it to suit its new African surroundings” (Achebe, *Morning Yet* 103). If the complex interrelationship between power and culture gets embedded in language, how do postcolonial writers use narrative strategies and aesthetic experimentation to articulate issues of representation and culture?

In this paper I will attempt to do two things: a) explicate some features of anti-colonial rhetoric of Aime Césaire and Frantz Fanon, and use that as a backdrop to then offer a more critical diagnosis of the debate between Ngũgĩ and Achebe on the issue of language; b) do a close reading of passages from novels by Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer, Salman Rushdie, and George Lamming, and demonstrate how aesthetic choices can counter, reflect, and propagate social values and call for representations of colonization to shift from European perspectives to the perspectives of those colonized.

Let me begin with colonial discourse.

In *Orientalism*, Said does an extensive analysis of how the Orient, or the Other, has been created through centuries of colonial conquest by the West through a body of scholarly works (literary/anthropological/historical/political) to configure the Orient as passive/uncivilized, so that the European imperialists could/can have moral/political/ideological authority over it. As Said points out, this construction of the Orient went hand-in-hand with the rise of Western imperialism to create a “systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively ... for dominating, reconstructing, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3). Besides illuminating his arguments with examples of works by French thinkers and writers like Silvestre de Sacy and Ernest Renan, Said also exposes orientalism in the literary works of George Eliot, Ezra Pound, and particularly in the lurking, lewd, lascivious caricature of

Egyptians in Gustave Flaubert's travelogue, *Flaubert in Egypt*: "At a sign from the doctor, they all stood up on their beds, undid their trouserbelts, and opened their anuses with their fingers to show their chancres" (qtd. in *Orientalism*, 186). Drawing on Foucault's power/knowledge nexus—that knowledge works with operations of power to create a discourse—Said reveals that the objective of orientalist discourse is not just "an airy European fantasy about the Orient but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment" (6).

Orientalism, then, constituted an entire system of thought and scholarship that facilitated a cultural misrepresentation of the Orient, but as Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair point out, the "orientalist school of thought" (117) was not a simultaneous, consistent operation in every colony. In India, for instance, such a program of colonial conquest "was different in tenor from the virulent Orientalism Edward Said discusses in relation to the Middle East" (Desai 117). Desai and Nair refer to British historian Thomas Macaulay's, "Minute on Indian Education" as a text that exemplifies the colonialist pursuit to institutionalize English studies in India.

Desai and Nair state that the initial stages of British colonization in India "stressed continued and systematized native education in the local traditions and histories" (117). By mid-eighteenth century, however, to lessen the cultural and linguistic gap between the colonizer and the colonized, British colonial authorities implemented a system of education in which the English language and culture were held up as the mirror of civilization against the backwardness of Indian vernacular languages. Macaulay even led an impassioned argument against the perceived inferiority of Indian literary traditions: "I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (123). What is clear in both Said's and Macaulay's arguments is the

significance of language, and by extension, of literature, as a tool of colonial dominance that produced a certain kind of knowledge that positioned the West as superior to the colonized cultures; in other words, orientalism produced the Western/Other binary.

Some of the most forceful and articulate reactions to such a binary came from French educated, intellectual revolutionaries of decolonization: Senegalese Leopold Sedar Senghor and Martiniquean Aime Cesaire, who coined the term “Negritude” to refer to a movement of resistance—both political and literary—that demanded a reclamation of pride in the black experience. I lay out the context of Negritude because it is a concept interlinked with issues of language and identity. Cesaire states: “No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production...colonization = thingification” (16). As a battle against “thingification,” Negritude would not only have a political dimension, but also an *aesthetic* one in which Black art—“poetry, song, dance, sculpture, and painting, used as techniques of integration” would “*recreate* the universe and the contemporary world, but in a more harmonious way by making use of African humor, which corrects distortions at the expense of the foreign Fulani and the white conquerors” (Senghor 188).

Though the idea of Negritude had a certain potency in asserting the issue of black pride, it also found a fair share of detractors who were critical of essentializing blackness as a homogenous identity and of retrieving and laying claims to the purity of pre-colonial black culture and artistic movement. One of their harshest critics was fellow Martiniquan intellectual Frantz Fanon.

Fanon was not just a political revolutionary involved in the Algerian resistance against France; he also experienced the Algerian war first-hand as a psychiatrist treating patients from both sides. He also studied the depth of torture of the Algerians by the French and wrote its implications in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Perhaps it was his involvement with northern Africans, most of whom were not racially Black, that made him skeptical of the goal of a racial, as opposed to a national, identity. Though he acknowledged the role of negritude in fostering black consciousness, he was opposed to the notion of homogenizing black identity: “There will be no two cultures which are completely identical...There will never be such a thing as black culture because there is not a single politician who feels he has a vocation to bring black republics into being” (Fanon 210). Instead, once the Manichean (binary) world enforced by the colonizers has been disrupted through decolonization—“the substitution of one ‘species’ of mankind by another” (2)—Fanon asserts that the native *writers* have to rise to foster a national consciousness.

Fanon laid down three stages of development of the native writer in the writer’s quest to foster a national consciousness; in the first stage:

The colonized intellectual proves he has assimilated the colonizer’s culture. His works correspond point by point with those of his metropolitan counterparts. The inspiration is European and his works can be easily linked to a well-defined trend in metropolitan literature. This is the phase of full assimilation where we find Parnassians, Symbolists, and Surrealists among the colonized writers. (159)

In the second phase:

The colonized writer has his convictions shaken and decides to cast his mind back...since the colonized writer is not integrated with his people, he maintains an outsider’s relation

to them...this precombat literature is steeped in humor and allegory, at other times in anguish, malaise, death and even nausea. (159)

And finally:

A third stage, a combat stage where the colonized writer, after having tried to lose himself among the people, with the people, will rouse the people...combat literature, revolutionary literature, national literature emerges...to portray their people and become the spokesperson of a new reality in action. (159)

It is in light of this brief context that I would like to focus on the specific positions taken by Ngugi and Achebe with regards to the role of the imperial language. Ngugi's first and most autobiographical novel, *Weep Not Child*, is an account of Kenya's armed struggle in the 1950s seen through the eyes of a child. This was succeeded by a few more novels in English including the *Petals of Blood* in 1977 after which the author abandoned English for Gikuyu, his native language. Ngugi translated several of his own work into English including the novel, *Devil on the Cross*. Even though he has very recently gone back to writing in English—a point worthy of debate in itself—I will base my interpretation on his views against the English/imperialist language as documented in *Decolonising the Mind*, in which he announces his “farewell to English” as a medium for any kind of writing.

In the introduction to *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi states that the biggest weapon unleashed by imperialism in Africa was the “cultural bomb”: “the effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their heritage of struggle, their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves” (3). It is the tremor of this cultural bomb that stamps out the spirit of native cultures to produce a “society of bodiless heads and headless bodies” (Ngugi 28).

Ngugi sees language and culture intersecting at multiple levels and stresses the fact that colonizers enforce an outside culture into the native hearts and minds and slowly rob the natives of their own tongues, their own cultural and intellectual make-up, and ultimately their own understanding of themselves through their roots, their languages: “Thus language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds” (Ngugi 12). Ngugi views culture not just as a reflector of society, but as an entity that shapes society, and because language is the carrier of that culture, how we speak defines who we are. In that light, Ngugi sees the importance of vernacular letters growing and prospering in the garden of African languages; in order for that to happen, the root of English, according to him, has to be uprooted, including Achebe’s idea of the new English which “will be able to carry the weight of [an] African experience...a new English still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings” (Achebe, *Morning Yet* 14). Ngugi’s response to Achebe:

The only question that preoccupied us [Achebe and others who wrote in English] was how best to make the borrowed tongues carry the weight of our African experience by, for instance, making them ‘prey’ on African proverbs and other peculiarities of African speech and folklore...Why we may ask, should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues? (8).

Unlike Ngugi, Achebe sees a political motivation for picking up English as the weapon of literary expression, and the motivation is to overthrow the imperialist perception of Africa by using the imperialist language: “We chose English not because the British desired it but because having tacitly accepted the new nationalities into which colonialism has grouped us, we needed

its language to transact our business, including the business of overthrowing colonialism itself in the fullness of time” (Achebe, *Morning Yet* 8).

The irony in Achebe’s narrative of resistance lies in the fact that the narrative of resistance itself derives its power from the tradition it seeks to reject. But Achebe argues that by incorporating Igbo folklore and proverbs into his narrative, he not simply uses English, but, to go back to an earlier quotation I used, he “alter[s] it to suit its new African surroundings” (Achebe, *Morning Yet* 103). Acknowledging the link between language and the formation of the nation-state, Achebe takes a contrasting view from Ngugi to suggest that without English there would be no Nigeria:

Let us give the devil its due: colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were small scattered ones before...[in Nigeria] the national literature, as I see it, is the literature written in English; ethnic literatures are in Hasua, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Edo, Ijaw, etc., etc...Therefore those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecks with an eye on the main chance—outside their own countries. They are by-products of the same process that made the new nation-states of Africa. (95)

Seen in the context of Fanon’s hierarchy of the native writer, Achebe would perhaps have to settle for the second place—if *Things Fall Apart* is taken as an indication of the altering of language with its generous use of Ibo proverbs. Achebe not only uses native speech patterns within the constraints of the novel, the novel also invokes a certain nostalgia for a pre-colonial Igbo community. Ngugi, on the other hand, would fit the criteria of the enlightened writer for his commitment to writing in the native language for a native readership.

Around the same time that Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, Barbadian writer George Lamming's autobiographical novel *In the Castle of My Skin* came out. Though Lamming did not have to wrestle between a native language and English—he was reared in colonial English—he uses language in the novel to chronicle the fractured adolescence of a young boy raised in colonial Barbados. Though not as distinctly stylized as Achebe's novel, Lamming disrupts the authority of the English novel by creating a character with a fractured consciousness embodied in the meandering narrative and point-of-view shifts. The imperial presence in the novel is not just represented by the mechanisms of British authority, but also by the American dream, of which the character Trumper is an energetic pursuer. On his return to Barbados, Trumper, with a newly acquired American twang, speaks of the Black dignity in America, in France, in Britain:

You'll hear 'bout the Englishman, an' the Frenchman, an the American which mean man of America. An' each is call that 'cause he born in that particular place. But you'll become a Negro like me an' all the rest in the States an' all over the world, coz it ain't 'av nothin' to do with where you born. (142)

Though Trumper speaks of racism inflicted upon Blacks in Europe and America, he is also alluding to the unity of the black race which is reflected in his slang speech that is in stark contrast to the conventional, standard, colonial English that the narrator uses; a language he sees as a colonial import, a day-to-day instrument of subjugation:

It was the language of the overseer, the language of the Government servant, and later the language of lawyers and doctors who had returned stamped like an envelope with what they called the culture of the mother country. (59)

While Ngugi and Achebe debate over native language versus imperial language, Lamming's novel shows us the way in which the imperial language itself can be stratified into

different classes and who is doing the speaking and to whom can also dictate the authority of the language. Lamming uses the English language to reveal the fissures that exist in society: the English of instruction, the English of home, and the English of desire and imagination express differing cultural experiences.

On the other side of the language debate is Salman Rushdie who has famously glorified the relationship between postcolonial Indian writers and the English language:

The prose writing—both fiction and nonfiction—created by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the...so-called ‘vernacular languages,’ during the same time; and, indeed, this new and still burgeoning, ‘Indo-Anglican’ literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books. The true Indian literature of the first postcolonial half-century has been made in the language the British left behind. (“Damme” 50)

Rushdie goes on to say that not only is English fiction by Indian writers appreciated the world over, but the unique style in which they write is impacting the language itself:

Western publishers and critics have been growing gradually more and more excited by the voices emerging from India; in England, at least, British writers are often chastised by reviewers for their lack of Indian-style ambition and verve. It feels as if the East were imposing itself on the West, rather than the other way around (Rushdie, “Damme” 50).

As my review has demonstrated so far, the debate over language in postcolonial studies is connected to issues of racial, ethnic, and national identities, and there seem to be two major strands of thoughts out of which other categories cross over. Between the two main strands that appear—the negritude call for Afrocentricity as an assault on Eurocentricism and Achebe’s

Africanization of the English language—there is also the third approach of critics like Homi Bhabha who point out the unstable identities that erupt out of the colonial encounter. I will later illustrate Bhabha's hybridity in the context of *Midnight's Children*. On the heels of Bhabha, though making a different argument from that of the ambivalence of the colonial encounter is Paul Gilroy, whose *Black Atlantic* is a critique on essentializing Black nationalism. Gilroy posits that contemporary Black culture is a result of trans-Atlantic encounter between the Black Diaspora of Europe, North America, and the Caribbean:

The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through a desire to transcend both a structure of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity. These desires are relevant to understanding political organizing and cultural criticism. They have already sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national and political cultures and nation-states in America, the Caribbean, and Europe. (19)

Though Gilroy does not deal with postcolonial fiction or postcolonial writers to further his argument about the birth of black cultural and artistic movement through trans-national exchange, he does a detailed explication of how reggae and hip-hop have been generated through ideas and styles that have traveled across the Atlantic. Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, though not directly about language, puts the focus on a character like Lamming's Trumper: trans-Atlantic in character and devoted to the music of Paul Robeson. Trumper is a man who mimics not the whites of the mother-country, but fellow blacks of the "brotha" country.

If language is intricately tied to issues of identity and culture, how have postcolonial novelists articulated such issues through aesthetic choices and narrative techniques?

Again, I'd like to start with Achebe and *Things Fall Apart*.

On the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah's contention that he is not an African writer, but just a writer, Achebe mock-praises him for living in a "modern, existential no-man's land": "I know the source of our problem, of course. *Anxiety*. Africa has had such a fate in the world that the very adjective African can still call up hideous fears of rejection. Better then to cut all links with the homeland, this liability, and become in one giant leap the universal man...if writers should opt for such escapism, who is to meet the challenge?" (Achebe, *Morning Yet* 39). For Achebe, throwing in some "realistic ingredients" or "ethnographic details" is not enough to make a novel an African novel. The African writer has the "inescapable grammar of values to straighten out" (43). The grammar of values could be interpreted as the power of politics inherent in language, and Achebe seems to be deriding Armah for mistaking "universality" or "escapism" with a kind of creative freedom that, for the Nigerian writer, is akin to clinging to the "outposts of the empire" (43). Imaginative freedom for Achebe comes not from escaping, but embracing indigenous storytelling strategies, and using them to *bend* the English language.

This bending of the language, for Achebe, is executed through the use of Ibo proverbs in his narrative. Proverbs are among the easily distinguishable devices in *Things Fall Apart*. My view, based on other critical interpretations I have gathered, is that the author uses proverbs not just as aesthetic embellishments, nor as a way to convince a foreign reader of the setting's authenticity. Achebe's proverbs are crucial to the narrative structure of the novel because the proverbs comment on the behavior and activities of the principle characters; they draw the reader's attention to a particular point that the narrator is making; and they reveal the moral and ethical codes of the Ibo culture, which is crucial to a critical understanding of the novel. No

wonder, the narrator of *Things Fall Apart* asserts that, “Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” (7).

According to Nigerian literary critic, Kalu Ogbaa, Igbo conversation has to have its formalities; it requires some responsibilities on the part of the conversationalist such as knowing what to say, when and how to say it, to whom it should be said, as well as the ability to communicate without being offensive or misunderstood: “[The ability to use proverbs] constitutes a rhetorical stance which can elevate a speaker’s conversation to the level of oratory. A good conversation, therefore, is the beginning of Igbo oral performance or oral literature; and proverbs are an invaluable mnemonic device for keeping the literature alive” (112).

As a rhetorical aid and stylized verbal form, the Igbo proverb is termed by the narrator of *Things Fall Apart* as “the palm oil with which words are eaten” (7). The metaphor is very significant because “there is hardly an Ibo menu or recipe that does not include palm oil, just as there is hardly any good Igbo speech without the speaker interlacing it with some proverbs” (Ogbaa 112). That means proverbs are very important and current in Igbo language and literature, for they express the life and civilization of the people. Ogbaa concurs: “That is why [proverbs] are found in folktales, folk songs, drum language, dirges, and in common prayers and incantations” (23).

At the end of the novel, Okonkwo’s demise signals the demise of the traditional Igbo culture, the demise of native oral tradition, the demise of a proverb-laden pattern of speech. This demise is heightened with the arrival of the British District Commissioner who contemplates his own interpretation of the Igbo culture, which he plans to record in a book that he plans to write about the Lower Niger. In the final pages of *Things Fall Apart*, the narrative point-of-view shifts to that of the British District Commissioner:

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from a tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write, he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter, but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (209)

The end of the novel emphasizes not only the replacement of the Igbo culture by English imperialism, and the Igbo language by English, but the displacement of the proverb-laden native speech by the written word.

Like the characters of *Things Fall Apart* who are frightened and mesmerized by the coming of colonialism, Achebe himself offers a similar fascination with the English novel: “In our time, literature was just another marvel that came with all the other wondrous things of civilization, like motor cars and airplanes, from far away. They had very little to do with us, or rather, we had very little to do with them, except in the role of wide-eyed consumers” (Achebe, “Morning Yet” 65). Achebe initiated a discourse of resistance against the misrepresentation of Africans in the English novel. Achebe has stated that his motivation to write a novel about Africa in English came from a desire to contest the earlier portrayals of Africans as savages by

European writers, particularly by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*: “*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as the ‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (Achebe, “An Image of Africa” 323).

Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* offers an interesting, stylistic departure from *Things Fall Apart*. *July’s People* is set during a fictional civil war in which black South Africans have violently overturned the system of apartheid. The story follows the Smales, a white South African family forced to flee Johannesburg to the native village of their black servant, July. The aesthetic departure from *Things Fall Apart* is exemplified most clearly in *July’s People* through Gordimer’s use of point-of-view. While Achebe uses the point-of-view shift at the end of the novel to signal the arrival of colonial authority, Gordimer offers alternating points-of-view—though mostly Maureen’s, but also of July, Bam, July’s wife—to grant reversal of roles, shifts of power, switch of perspectives: here racial and class confrontation is not the aftermath, but starts from the very first page all the way to the ambiguous ending. As the Smales become guests in July’s (their servant’s) hut to escape a militant, apocalyptic reversal of apartheid—black, armed overthrow of white affluence and power—July becomes the savior of his erstwhile masters. Amidst the new surroundings of crumbling mud walls and pink glasses, Maureen struggles to lay claim to her recently vanished identity of a liberal, white female, and just when the reader feels she couldn’t have it any worse, Gordimer renders her even more irrelevant by seizing the point of view from her and granting it to July. Here is an example after July has taken—without permission—complete ownership of the Smales’ van:

He thought of the pass-book itself as finished. Rid of it, he drove the yellow bakkie with nothing in his pockets. But he had not actually destroyed it. He needed someone—he

didn't yet know who—to tell him: burn it, let it swell in the river, their signatures washing away. 137

Interspersed with point-of-view shifts, Gordimer also employs the voice of an external narrator, almost an intrusive narrator, when called for to make a large political statement, or deride a character more severely than the courtesy of a character perspective would allow. When describing the behavior of the village chief, the author allows the invisible narrator to come as a wedge between Maureen and the reader and offer this commentary:

He harangued them all, his force flew rhetoric that ended majestically with reverberations from his iron-dark, iron-spare chest showing through a cheap nylon shirt, and in the dying away of hissing breaths with a final sound like a high-note clap! At the back of his throat. (119)

Maureen rarely reveals this kind of articulateness, especially under the duress that she finds herself in, in the chief's village, but Gordimer, unable to resist the temptation of vividly describing the chief's nylon shirt and hissing breath, lends some humor in the narrative before the Smales find themselves back in the dirt, scrambling for their past identity. As S. Shankar points out in his essay, "Twentieth-Century Novel in English":

While any novel can make use of shifts of point of view to explore versions of reality...the exploration of this particular resource in African novels like *July's People* is often much more easily legible as determined by history and politics—that is, it is closely linked to questions of power, race, and social control. (283)

*Things Fall Apart* leaves no room for any doubt as to the eventual fate of the Ibo village, but the end of *July's People* has Maureen running towards a helicopter that could be her savior or her murderer, leaving her fate, as that of the fate of white South Africans, open-ended. The

novel's experimentation, in my mind, comes out of its resistance to grant complete privilege to any one point-of-view, as novels about racial confrontations—*Things Fall Apart*, *Disgrace*, etc—usually do, and in Gordimer's use of the Chekhovian “white space” into which the reader has to fill his/her own reading, especially of the apocalyptic ending.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* employs stylistic experimentation at multiple levels. In the preface to *Kanthalpura*, one of the seminal novels in the English language from pre-independent India, Raja Rao writes that while English had become the language of India's “intellectual makeup,” it wasn't the tongue of its “emotional make-up” (iv). He called on the Indian writer to create a distinctive dialect in which “the tempo of Indian life ... [would be] infused into our English expression even as the tempo of American or Irish life has gone into the making of theirs” (iv).

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie uses vernacular words, idioms, speech patterns into the narrative to create a mishmash version of local Bombay English. Take the following exchange between Saleem and the “vendor of notions”:

Ho sir! Absolute master thing! Is silver? Is precious stone? You give; I give radio, camera, almost working order, my sir! Is a damn good deals, my friend. For one spittoon only, is damn fine. Ho yes. Ho yes, my sir, life must go on: trade must go on, my sir, not true? (360)

This musicality of Bombay-street slang into English and the awkward syntactical structure gives the text a sort of a heteroglot impurity that a single-minded devotion to an idea of pure English would have made impossible. In an interesting twist to Ngugi's call for vernacular languages to combat the cultural impurity of the imperial language, Rushdie uses a hotchpotch of language to comment on the urban cosmopolitanism of Bombay. Saleem's unreliability is

another marker of postcolonial experimentation in the novel. The reader is not even entirely sure of Saleem's biological/cultural/religious lineage: whose son is he, really? Amina and Ahmad's or Vanita and Methwold's? Consequently, Saleem's abilities as an omniscient narrator gifted with supernatural visions, his solidarities with both Ganesha's trunk and Scheherazade's spells, his prophetic hallucinations, etc., could be interpreted in the Bhabha-ian notion of hybridity as a concept encompassing ambivalent forms of identity. Even Padma, Saleem's wife, exclaims in horror: "What are you telling me? You are an Anglo-Indian? Your name is not your own?" to which Saleem replies, "I am Saleem Sinai...Snotnose, Stainface, Sniffer, Baldy, Piece-of-the-Moon. Whatever do you mean? Not my own" (117).

According to Homi Bhabha, it is the colonizer who provokes mimicry to create a class of natives who, to borrow from Thomas Macaulay, are "Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay 130).

Bhabha states:

colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. (86)

But the mimicry turns to menace because mimicry is only a "partial" representation, and this partial presence results in a "double vision" of the colonial subject, which "in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (Bhabha 87). Though Bhabha contextualizes his argument within a broader frame of colonial discourse, in particular with reference to the colonizer's desire to Anglicize the native to the point of "almost the same, but not quite," the fissure of disruption eventually finds its way around and seeps into the pages of

the postcolonial novel, particularly in *Midnight's Children* in which the mimicry of language and the ambivalence of the narrator disrupts the idea of a fixed, national or ideological identity.

*Midnight's Children* also invokes Derek Walcott's concept of mimicry as "an act of imagination": "Where have cultures originated? By the force of natural surroundings. You build according to the topography of where you live. You are what you eat, and so on: you mystify what you see, you create what you need spiritually, a god for each need" (Walcott 263). Walcott adds:

In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered, what has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention. (259)

Walcott, therefore, reads mimicry not as a passive, subservient act, but as an agency of imagination. Mimicry in Walcott's postulation becomes what Desai and Nair point as "a creative and subversive defense mechanism" (251). In Walcott's essay, "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" Walcott is responding to his contemporary V.S. Naipaul's construction of "mimic men" in Naipaul's novel of the same name. In the novel, Caribbean culture is alluded to as a poor imitation of European/American culture. Walcott's response can be read not only as an indictment of Naipaul, but it could be interpreted as a challenge to Ngugi's assertion of a pure, pre-colonial native culture. In Walcott's view, imitation has the potential for invention.

In *Reading the African Novel*, Simon Gikandi states that the writer of the African novel is haunted by a sense of the past "because of the generic imperative that he/she must come to with history" (255). Both *Things Fall Apart* and *July's People* are in some ways about the confrontation of history with the self as well as with a community that is transforming into a

nation-state. Ben Okri's novel, *Famished Road*, with its non-linear structure dissolves history into a meandering of time that jumbles to form the consciousness of the narrator, a spirit child, who exists between life and death; between the river and the road, defying any notion of boundary that contains time, space, or identity: "In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry" (Okri 3).

Ben Okri describes a novel not as having a beginning, a middle, and an end, but an "interval in the enchantment of living...phases of music...this earth is full of stories in the same way that the ocean is full of ocean. My writing is not about what's on the page. It's meant to take you outside the page" (Okri, "The Writers' Club"). *Famished Road* is often categorized as magic realism; it is a novel about a boy who has relationships with spirits some of whom are invisible on the page. Time travels in the novel sometimes ahead of, but at other times behind the character—the episodic chapters are not numbered chronologically—and the structure revels in a non-linear flow that disrupts the imminence of an Aristotelian denouement. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Azaro, a spirit child, who tries to stay afloat in a grimy and corrupt world, the famished road, in the company of spirits and myths. Azaro becomes an allegory of the Yoruba community whose only redemption comes from embracing a mythical culture in the journey of the famished road. Though history might not matter as the source, as the repository of native culture in the novel, stylistically, though, Okri's novel—perhaps without his intentions—is a manifestation of African art that Senghor describes in "Negritude":

In Black Africa, art is not a separate activity, in itself or for itself: it is a social activity, a technique of living, a handicraft of fact...art does not consist in photographing nature but in taming it...the call is not the simple reproduction of the cry of the Other: it is a call of

complementarity, a song: a call of harmony to the harmony of union that enriches by increasing Being. (189)

According to Marxist critic Fredrick Jameson, a prominent feature of western capitalist culture, and by extension, the western novel, is the split between the public and the private; this split is absent in third-world cultures, and therefore in novels from the third-world, the poetic and the political mesh to form national allegories: “All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I call national allegories” (Jameson 69). Even though this sweeping generalization might seem lacking in insight and nuance, Jameson might not be far off when we consider all three novels discussed in this paper; after all, if there’s one common link between Saleem Sainai and Maureen Smale, it is that both of their fates seem to be intricately tied with that of their nation-states. There is no nation-state to which Okonkwo belongs, though he is a part of an indigenous Igbo community that has its own customs and language—his demise signals the encroachment of colonialists and the fall of the Igbo community. What Jameson fails to note, however, is that the complex narrative strategies of each novel also project themselves as anti-allegories. As Achebe has pointed out, with English came the birth of nation-states in Africa, so Okonkwo’s death marks not the end, but the birth of a nation; Sainai’s self-parody of the allegory—his constant references to his life with that of India—gives the allegory parody-like character, not to be taken too seriously; Gordimer’s prophecy finally doesn’t reflect the actual fate of white South Africa; and in Okri’s novel the subject of allegory is an intangible spirit that cannot be mapped out in the shape of a nation-state.

Finally, experimentation in postcolonial literature cannot be limited to Anglophone literature. If a feature of experimentation is in thematic and linguistic hybridity, by carefully

explicating the Tamil poem “Situation” by K.N. Subramanyam, S. Shankar illustrates the hybridity inherent in the cultural heritage of the person described in the poem; the speaker of the poem points out that the subject’s—presumably a Tamil male—introduction to the Upanishads, Tagore, and Indian traditions has been routed through western modernists like Eliot and Pound. More importantly, Shankar reminds us, the poem itself is hybrid: “The cultural hybridity of the poem, then, is not just a matter of citation; such hybridity inheres not just in the manner in which it incorporates Pound’s poem within itself but in that ‘Situation’ is, if one grants that an author’s translation of his or her own work has a different status from other translations, a bilingual poem” (Shankar 70). If hybridity, then, is a feature of postcolonial experimentation, then, it is certainly not limited to works written in English. Does that, however, extend the argument that vernacular postcolonial literature, as illustrated by this Tamil poem, could also be breaking new grounds within their own traditions? Are they also experimental, or are they experimental enough? Should such aesthetics be judged by different conventions, or can they be studied within the same breadth as works written in English? A deeper analysis into these questions is perhaps called for in a larger paper. What is clear is that stylistic experimentation has been a critical feature of many postcolonial writings, and as identities keep getting reconfigured in the globalized world, so will their expressions through the poetics and politics of language.

In conclusion, I’d like to bring back the focus to the politics of language. Benedict Anderson has reminded us of the significance of the novel in the creation of a nation-state. Anderson states that the nation is an imagined community through a homogenous empty time. He uses the structure of the novel—“masterpieces of Balzac” (25)—as a framework for the sociological mapping of a nation: a novel moves through “homogenous empty time” and during the sequence of that movement some character never meet, much like people within a nation, yet

they are confident about each other's existence, bound by some idea of kinship:

A and D never meet, indeed may not be aware of each other's existence if C has played her cards right. What then actually links A to D? ...they are embedded in societies... embedded in the minds of the omniscient reader. 25

Despite Anderson's influence on theories of nationalism, critic Partha Chatterjee has objected to Anderson's conceptualization of the imagined community as a universal phenomenon. Chatterjee asks, "If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?" (5). Chatterjee posits that if novel was so central in the imagining of a nation, the role of writing and aesthetics was equally significant in anti-colonial movements, this time in Bengal, India. Chatterjee states that nationalism was thought of—in the case of Bengali elites—in the spiritual domain before it took shape in the political domain. The spiritual was the domain of culture and aesthetics:

The bilingual intelligentsia came to think of its own language as belonging to that inner domain of cultural identity, from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out; language therefore became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world...the novel was a principal form through which the bilingual elite in Bengal fashioned a new narrative prose. In the devising of this prose, the influence of the two available models—modern English and classical Sanskrit—was obvious. (7-8)

The diversity in opinions and styles of postcolonial novelists and intellectuals makes it clear is that language has been a central issue in postcolonial literature, and it raises several polemical questions: should a non-native English speaker write in English? If so, should the

writer consciously appropriate language to convey the local experience? Do certain aesthetic choices imply political resistance? Such questions are crucial to think about for any writer. In my own case, thinking about such issues helps my growth as a writer and reminds me of my cultural/aesthetic makeup, which I have described in the introduction. But, as a writer, will I ever employ narrative strategies to make larger points about culture? Perhaps I will—if I learn to artfully execute such strategies, and more importantly, if those aesthetic choices ultimately serve the story.

## Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*. London: Heinemann, 1975.
- . *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. 1983. New York: Verso, 2006.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Cesaire, Aime. *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "Whose Imagined Community?" *Mapping the Nation*. Ed. Gopal Balakrishnan. New York: Verso, 2012.
- Dixit, Kunda. *People After War*. Kathmandu: Himal, 2009.
- Gikandi, Simon. *Reading the African Novel*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1987.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Gordimer, Nadine. *July's People*. New York: Viking, 1981.
- Jameson, Fredrick. "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital." *Social Text*. 1986: 65-88.
- Jin, Ha. *The Writer as Migrant*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Lamming, George. *In the Castle of my Skin*. Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1970.
- Macaulay, Babington Thomas. "Minute on Indian Education: Feb 2, 1835." *Postcolonialisms*. eds. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2005.
- Narayan, R.K. "The Problem of the Indian Writer." *A Storyteller's World*. New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1989.
- Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road*. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.
- . "The Writers' Club." Interview, *You Tube*.
- Rao, Raja. Author's Foreword to *Kananthapura*. 1937; reprint, New York: New Directions,

1967.

Rushdie, Salman. "Damme, This is the Oriental Scene for You." *The New Yorker*. 23 June 1997.

Web. 6 August 2013.

----. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Penguin, 1982.

----. *Midnight's Children*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1981.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979

Senghor, Sedar Leopold. "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century." *Postcolonialisms*.

eds. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2005.

Shankar, S. "Midnight's Orphans, Or a Postcolonialism Worth its Name." *Cultural Critique*.

2004: Vol. 56.

Shankar, S. "The African Novel in a Course of Twentieth-Century Novel in English."

Teaching the African Novel. ed. Gaurav Desai. New York: MLA Press, 2009.

Walcott, Derek. "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" *Postcolonialisms*. eds. Gaurav Desai and

Supriya Nair. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2005.

Wa Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ. *Decolonising the Mind*. Oxford: James Curry, 1981