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FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND  
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The Postexotic Arab:  
Orientalist Dystopias in Contemporary Postcolonial Fiction

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**The Postexotic Arab:  
Orientalist Dystopias in Contemporary Postcolonial Fiction**

**Atef Laouyene**

**Thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the PhD degree in English**

**Department of English  
Faculty of Arts  
University Ottawa**

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395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
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*Your file    Votre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-48401-2*  
*Our file    Notre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-48401-2*

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation draws on modern theories of the exotic in order to critique racialized, consumer-oriented representations of Arabs. Such representations often betray an exoticist and neo-colonial discursive pattern in which things Arab figure essentially as an index for a threateningly attractive otherness. Reading the texts of Leila Sebbar's *Shérazade* (1982), Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (1996), Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1996), and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and *The Language of Baklava* (2005), I argue that contemporary postcolonial fiction displays a patently self-conscious, self-parodic engagement with the constitutive paradoxes of the discourse of exoticism, especially when this discourse takes the Arab figure as its subject. I avail myself of "postexotic Arabness" as a tropological descriptor for such an engagement. Postexotic Arabness thus designates the creation of narrative dystopias that not only ironically recycle Orientalist configurations of things Arab but also implicate both authors and readers in an ultimately self-parodic re-assessment of the Arab exotic. The strategic exoticization of Arab otherness in these works, I argue, is also coterminous with a historically conscious critique of global consumer culture and unequal social relations of power.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Cynthia Sugars, for her insightful and speedy feedback, her painstaking revisions, and her valuable advice. My deepest gratefulness to Professor Donald Childs, whose unwavering support in difficult times, professional guidance, and belief in my work helped me see this dissertation through. Copious thanks also go to Professor Bernhard Radloff whose support and occasional chats were greatly appreciated.

Special thanks must also be extended to the thesis examiners, Professor Chris Bongie, Professor Craig Gordon, Professor David Jarraway, and Professor Bernhard Radloff.

Finally, I cannot be grateful enough to my parents who have never ceased to lavish on me their love and prayers. To them and to every member of my family, I dedicate this dissertation.

## Introduction: Toward an Aesthetic of Postexotic Arabness

This dissertation draws on contemporary theories of the exotic in order to critique the exoticist subtexts that continue to inform literary and visual representations of Arabs. Focusing on the works of Leila Sebbar, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Salman Rushdie, and Diana Abu-Jaber, I highlight narrative sites where the exoticization of the Arab figure deconstructs the Orientalist binaries of Self/Other, White/Black, and Center/Periphery, which have constituted the epistemological underpinnings of traditional exoticist discourse from the Renaissance onward. The narrative exoticizations of the Arab figure in contemporary postcolonial fiction are strategic in two ways: while they unsettle the Orientalist foundations of the exoticist discourse, they offer ways of salvaging Arab otherness, not by grounding it in a politics of originary identity, but rather by foregrounding the socio-political and historical contingencies that determine its discursive and cultural configurations.

Traditionally, exoticism indicates a deliberate narrative process whereby the effect of the exotic is achieved. However, since this process can operate discernibly in colonial and postcolonial fiction, as well as in a variety of literary genres and ethnographic texts, I use instead the concept “postexotic,” where the prefix “post-” refers specifically to a subversive strategy in postcolonial narrativization of the Arab Other. In this respect, the “post-” in postexoticism is equivalent to the “post-” in Anthony Kwame Appiah’s use of postcolonialism, which “like that of postmodernism” is one “that challenges earlier legitimating narratives” (98-99). I deploy the prefix “post-” in postexotic, not as an indicator of *prepositional* chronology, but as a marker of *disruptive* epistemology (hence my disposal of the hyphen). And by the “postexotic

Arab” I refer to a set of tropes expressive of a revised sense of Arabness, one that is repeatedly constructed and re-constructed out of de-exoticized revisions, not reversions, of traditional Orientalist metanarratives. I conceive of the Arab Other in postcolonial fiction as both growing out of and ironically departing from the confining epistemes of Orientalism. The postexotic tropes that I identify in the novels I propose to examine in this thesis partake in what Gyan Prakash calls post-Orientalist histories that do not merely invert the Hegelian dialectic but transcend it in such a way as to articulate “constructed and contingent [postcolonial] identities” (“Writing” 876).

The purpose of this thesis is not to evoke an “authentic” sense of Arabness and read it against “inauthentic” Western representations of it. Rather, the thesis shall be informed by the need to understand cultures and identities, Arab or otherwise, as polymorphous phenomena subject to continuous processes of construction and deconstruction, processes that themselves are contingent upon specific historical conjunctures and socio-economic and geo-political contingencies. Lest it be read as an *apologia* for identitarian pan-Arabism gone wrong, my thesis will insist that identities are evolving, heterogeneous constructs locatable within and sustainable through narratives that are themselves crisscrossed by a variety of inter-cultural trajectories and enunciated at different historical junctures. By this I mean that identity cannot be construed independently of narrative. As much as it determines narrative, narrative also determines it. Identity is not constituted simply by the sum of lived experiences within a certain collectivity in a certain era. It is also constituted by the way it is narrativized, conceptualized, and transmitted across what Stanley Fish calls different “interpretive communities.” As Stuart Hall puts it, “[I]dentities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives

of the past” (236). Similarly, Arab identity is to be understood not as something fixed in its pastness, but rather as something that keeps changing in accordance with the way it is lived, narrated, and read across time and space. And part of its narrativization in the novels I examine has to do with the need to wrench it free from the centuries-old exoticist mould in which it continues to be cast. Born into and familiar with Arabic-Islamic culture (Tunisian, more precisely), I want to raise a more progressive awareness of the modern reality of that culture and highlight its significance in a multiculturally “polycentric world” (Majid 4-5).

Following a combined model of Saidian-Bhabhian colonial discourse analysis, Anglo-Arab feminism, and Deleuzo-Kristevan poststructuralism, the thesis undertakes critical readings of Leila Sebbar’s *Shérázade* (1982), Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995), Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees* (1996), and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* (2003) and *The Language of Baklava* (2005). I have chosen to focus on these texts because they each create what I want to call “Orientalist dystopias” in which the Arab exotic is re-configured essentially as a subversive trope that, among other things, undermines today’s global subsumption and consumption of cultural difference. “Orientalist dystopias” here refer to the ways in which the postcolonial writer displays a smorgasbord of utopian iconographies that seem initially to confirm the Western reader’s Orientalist imaginary about the exotic Other. At a later stage, however, that imaginary is punctured through the insertion of a de-exoticizing narrative element that disrupts the scopophilic pleasure derived from seeing/reading (consuming *tout court*) the Other through exoticist lenses.

The thesis comprises six chapters divided into two sections. The first section is focused on theoretical concerns. The second section provides an extended analysis of

the works mentioned above in which I identify postexoticism as a counter-discursive category that subverts the persistent Orientalization and commodification of the Arab Other. The term “counter-discourse” was first coined by Richard Terdiman to refer to forms of symbolic struggle against hegemonic structures of power and dominant discourses. It was appropriated afterward by postcolonial theorists (especially Helen Tiffin and Stephen Slemon) as a concept designating the ways in which peripheral writers subvert certain canonical/metropolitan texts by drawing attention to a presumed complicity between those texts and Eurocentric, colonial ideology (Ashcroft, *Key Concepts* 56-57).

\*\*\*\*\*

To deal with an “exotic” Arab Other in light (or rather in the shadow) of an “Arabophobia” spawned by the recent international crises may seem to some an untimely intervention. Nevertheless, because of the global circulation of exotica, including postcolonial literatures, in today’s metropolitan markets, an investigation of the notion of “the exotic” and its narrativization may yield valuable insights into the role of institutionalized discourses, such as postcolonialism, and into contemporary postcolonial representations of the Arab in particular. In *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), Graham Huggan concedes that while postcolonialism sets out to critique late-capitalism, it also offers itself up as a consumable “exotic” commodity within it, thus inevitably compromising its own political agenda. Arif Dirlik also argues that postcolonial critics have failed to consider postcolonialism’s implication in the structures of global capitalism that it seeks to undermine. Their obsessive and somewhat anachronistic focus on multicultural localities and individual

ethnicities blankets the fact that their academic practice is itself a by-product of global capitalism. In this respect, the term “Third World” comes to designate a mere “discursive category” or a conceptual descriptor with little historical significance (*The Postcolonial Aura* 2). Referring to the hegemonic expansion of global power relations, Dirlik calls for a re-conceptualization of a historical awareness that takes into consideration global economic structures of production and consumption. When postcolonial critics invoke “hybridity,” “in-betweenness,” “multiculturalism,” and “syncretism” as conceptual signifiers and/or ontological determinants of identity, they are simply eliding not only the historicity of these categories but also that of their own practice. Dirlik offers “*multi-historicalism*” as a substitute for multiculturalism whereby he designates a multiplicity of historical trajectories coming from different pasts and pointing toward different futures. In addition to providing a variety of alternative histories, multi-historicalism properly “recognize[s] the historicity of the cultural and social alternatives that it proposes rather than reif[ies] them” (17).

Along the same lines, in *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (1997), Timothy Brennan explains how Third World intellectuals are often hired for academic positions based on who they are, not on what they do: “[. . .] one is also familiar with the off-the-cuff comments of hiring committees who refer to the colonial slot as the ‘exotic’ position, by which they mean exotic not as in *does* but exotic as in *is*” (115; emphasis in original). According to Brennan, this unacknowledged conflation of a perceived ontological essence and occupational/intellectual practice in the Western academy can be evidenced, for instance, by the “striking” fact that “Arabic fiction now available in the West” has remarkably fallen short of challenging “the charges typically made against the cultures of Arabic [sic] peoples” (204).

In order to unbind themselves from the global “alterity industry,” Huggan argues, postcolonial writers often resort to what he calls “strategic exoticism” (i; 32). Such writers as Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Arundhati Roy, and Hanif Kureishi stage their own marginality so as to effect a parodic subversion not only of Orientalist exoticization of things Indian but also of the undifferentiated Western consumerism that tends to promote and perpetuate the global commodification of cultural difference in general (xii). Taking my cue from Huggan’s argument, I offer a postcolonial reading of “exoticized” inscriptions of Arabness in contemporary postcolonial fiction and raise a number of issues related to the conception and consumption of things Arab. What are the present challenges facing postcolonial authors/critics, particularly those of Arab background, in the context of today’s global multiculturalism? What alternative modalities of theoretical inquiry are necessary for the articulation of what it means to be an Arab today? How do we theorize a sense of Arabness without sliding into some form of national, religious and/or ethnic reductionism? How valuable, effective, or even relevant, is a strategic exoticization of Arab otherness in postcolonial narratives, especially when this otherness is now marketed less for its enriching cultural value than for the desire to understand its supposed potential threat?

In what follows I open up these questions to new ways of understanding and theorizing Arabness both in terms of its complex and multi-sited moments of enunciation and in terms of its circulation and consumption as an exotified ethno-cultural commodity. First, I survey twentieth-century theorizations of the discourse of exoticism and its vexed connection to imperial and (neo)colonial ideologies. Second, I show how “postexotic Arabness” operates in the novels under study as a distinct

narrative trope that parodies the persistent commodification of things Arab in today's consumer culture.

Victor Segalen's work, especially his *Essai sur L'exotisme: Une Esthétique du divers* (1907), is of paramount importance, for it broaches questions of alterity, othering, and subject positionality—all of which continue to be contentious concepts in postcolonial debates. Poet-cum-traveler-cum-aesthetician, Segalen re-defines exoticism by revising its persistent romantic (and Romanticist) association with outside *loci* wherein the individual hopes to find an alternative to, or an escape from, anxieties at home. More significantly, however, Segalen's essay offers a re-conceptualization of exoticism anchored in the ontological autonomy of the Other. For Segalen, exoticism is the aesthetic experiencing of alterity as such, independently of the ethical system of the perceiving Subject. Because it is essentially a category of perception, aesthetics necessarily precedes valuation. Exoticism, then, is first and foremost an "aesthetics of diversity." This implies that if difference is the *fons et origo* of the aesthetic, it is also the *sine qua non* of the exotic. However, and as Francis Affergan indicates in *Exotisme et altérité* (1987), "difference" must also be distinguished from "alterity" because, unlike the latter, it always involves the perceiving Subject as the point of reference in the experiencing of the aesthetic (9). As such, Segalenian exoticism is founded upon an aesthetics wherein pleasure is experienced simultaneously by the gazer and the gazed-on precisely at the moment of their initial encounter, without ever one fusing into the other. This abstract *rapprochement* of the aesthetic and the exotic along the axis of an unfathomably autonomous alterity is important to my project because it constitutes the blueprint for subsequent postcolonial theorizations of exoticism.

Exoticism's connection to and complicity with (neo)imperialist ideologies, especially after decolonization and the emergence of nationalist movements in several former colonies, has been emphasized by numerous cultural and postcolonial studies. Worth mentioning are Tzvetan Todorov's *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (1993), Chris Bongie's *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle* (1991), Peter Mason's *Infelicities: Representations of the Exotic* (1998), Roger Célestin's *From Cannibals to Radicals: Figures and Limits of Exoticism* (1996), and Deborah Root's *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference* (1996). Todorov, for one, argues that exoticism (xenophilia) and nationalism (xenophobia) are two "diametrically opposed" forms of relativism. While the nationalist places universal ethical value in his or her own culture, the exoticist places the same value in that of the remote Other. If exoticism here may be said to provide an instance where the Other is preferred to the Self, it does not by any means say anything about the "essence" of the Other. In fact, it is more a case of "self-criticism" than a genuine "valorization" of the Other (Todorov 264). For how can the Self bestow ethical value on that which is unfamiliar, strange, unknown? How can one praise what one cannot comprehend? Herein resides the ineluctable paradox of exoticism: "Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others; yet praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be" (265). More generally, it is the "unwarranted establishing of the specific values of one's own society as universal values" that Todorov perceives as the informing principle of all ethnocentric, racial, nationalist, and exoticist ideologies (1).

While Todorov asserts that exoticism, even in its relativistic mode, remains generally inextricable from the Eurocentric discourse of colonialism, Chris Bongie inscribes it within a modern aesthetics of loss and nostalgia. In *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle* (1991), Bongie identifies two types of exoticism: “imperialist exoticism” (the primitive Other must be colonized to be civilized) and “exoticizing exoticism” (the primitive Other is an alternative to a homogenizing modernity at home) (16). The importance of Bongie’s argument, however, lies in its reference to the ultimate “dissolution” of fin-de-siècle exoticism as the result of a momentous alliance between territorial colonialism and industrial modernity (18). Fin-de-siècle exoticism, according to Bongie, is essentially a trope of loss and nostalgia, that is, a “discursive practice intent on recovering ‘elsewhere’ values ‘lost’ with the modernization of European society” (5). The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phase of European expansionist imperialism has seen the transformation of the exotic from the symbol of *terra incognita* enclosing supposedly “authentic” (primitive) cultures to a familiar, mapped out space stripped of its appealing remoteness. The advent of what Zygmunt Bauman calls a “heavy modernity”—as opposed to today’s post-industrialized “light modernity” (Bauman 114)—put in the service of major imperial territorializations, has engendered a vision of the world as a containable, thus controllable, space. The requisite condition of the exotic, namely, its geographical remoteness, is thus invalidated and lost. “In the age of the New Imperialism,” Bongie asserts, “the exotic necessarily becomes, for those who persist in search of it, the sign of an aporia—of a constitutional absence at the heart of what had been projected as a possible alternative to modernity” (22). In Bongie’s view, such figures as Joseph Conrad and Victor Segalen, whose work inhabits the precarious

frontier space between imperialism and exoticism, try to articulate a fin-de-siècle crisis of exoticism as an “exhausted” discourse of alterity.

I want to argue that while fin-de-siècle fiction attempts to keep alive an already expiring exoticism, postcolonial fiction registers a return, or a re-working, of a new, counter-discursive one. Unlike its fin-de-siècle prototype, postcolonial exoticism is essentially a “transcultural” discourse, to use Mary Louise Pratt’s phrase (6), designating the ways in which the exoticized periphery displays itself as such to metropolitan spectatorship. While I recognize the historical specificities and generic applications of Pratt’s concept of “transculturation” (travel writings and European imperialism in Africa and South America since the mid-eighteenth century), I use it here as a theoretical springboard to effect a transition from the exoticism of fin-de-siècle New Imperialism to that of contemporary postcolonialism. More specifically, I avail myself of Pratt’s notion of transculturation not as an index for “hybridity” or “enculturation” but as a central conceptual signifier that describes the major paradigm shift that took place within the exoticist discourse from its turn-of-the-century perceived entropy to its postcolonial re-activation. In fact, it describes the transformation of exoticism from a colonial discourse about an “authentic,” space-defined otherness to be experienced and/or reported home to a politically re-coded discourse of subversion and resistance operating within the (neo)imperial metropolis itself.

On a discursive level, then, exoticism as a familiar aesthetics of escape gives way to postcolonial exoticism as a de-familiarizing representational practice that re-arranges the very exoticist rhetoric with which it engages. In a sense, the exoticist postcolonial text fulfills a function similar to that of Pratt’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-

century auto-ethnographic text. Pratt's neologism, "autoethnography," refers to textual instances where "the colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms" (7; emphasis in original). But autoethnography, Pratt goes on to argue, also "involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror" (7). Extending analogically Pratt's conceptualization to today's postcolonial exoticism, I want to argue that while appropriating metropolitan modes of representation, the authors I am discussing create Orientalist dystopias, or postexotic tropes, with a view to subverting the time-honoured discourse of exoticism itself.

Using the perspective of poststructuralism and deconstruction, I argue that the exoticization of the Arab Other in the novels under consideration is meant to interrogate the prescriptive grammar that underwrites the triumvirate of Center-Subject-Margin inherent in Orientalist exoticism. Roger C elestin's *From Cannibals to Radicals: Figures and Limits of Exoticism* (1996) offers probably the most consistent poststructuralist reading of the discourse of exoticism. Exoticism, in C elestin's view, is necessarily a discourse about the Center or the Same. Unlike Segalen, who conceives of "genuine" exoticism as complete detachment from one's culture, C elestin contends that one cannot possibly talk of exoticism without referring to the familiar culture of Home. Moreover, while Bongie views exoticism as an aesthetics of escape, an alternative to the disappointingly familiar culture of Home, C elestin goes further and insists that at the heart of this escapist aesthetics lies the crucial trope of subversive return. According to C elestin, there is a discursive counter-current, a subversive impulse, within the discourse of exoticism itself. In contrast to what Todorov calls relativistic exoticism, C elestin's exoticism is revealed to be less an idealization of a

foreign culture than a critique of a local one. Célestin's re-conceptualization of exoticism in terms of an internally conflicted triangulation (Subject-Home-Other) aims at establishing a new awareness of the exoticist discourse as a ceaseless yet vigorous negotiation of Subject positionality with regard to Home and Other, although Home remains the only invariable referent. His purpose is "to arrive at the view of exoticism as a relation between (Western) Self and (exotic) other that is *fluctuatingly tenuous or strong* depending on the narrating subject's position vis-à-vis a point of departure (and return) that I have alternately called Home, Center, and audience" (7; emphasis in original).

Célestin, however, concedes that this new re-conceptualization of exoticist discourse does not go unchallenged, especially when transplanted into a postmodern and postcolonial terrain, a terrain in which one reaches not an "aporia of exoticism" only but an aporia of representation as well (3; 8). While marginal writers like Bharati Mukherjee and Alejo Carpentier, he explains, engage in a sort of reverse exoticism in which the West is perceived as exotic (exotic New York, exotic Paris, exotic London, etc.), V.S. Naipaul goes a step further and questions the epistemological bases of the exoticist process altogether. Naipaul's fiction "can be said to represent a third type of exoticism: a world in which cultural differences have become diffuse and shifting, thus undermining the very basis of exoticism" (Célestin 18). In this thesis, I follow Célestin's lead and extend his insight to my reading of the narrative exoticization of Arab otherness in postcolonial fiction. Narrating the Arab Other through the elaboration of Orientalist dystopias disturbs what Célestin identifies as the exoticist "triangular trade." The phrase as Célestin uses it not only invokes an entire history of slave dealings and racial oppression but also re-defines exoticism as a discursive traffic

where the European Subject is constantly moving back and forth between the familiar space of Home and the unfamiliar space of the exotic Other, but always using the familiar language of Home as “a point of reference” (7). Postcolonial representations of the Arab, like Naipaul’s exoticist fiction, often challenge exoticism’s Center-Subject-Margin triangulation precisely because the constitutive coordinates of that triangular space are revealed to be inadequate referential grounds to negotiate Subject positionality.

My reading of the chosen texts partakes in a current debate in postcolonial circles about the value of commodified cultural difference in the global market economy. My intervention in this debate is specifically a *mise-en-question* of the motives behind the aestheticized spectacularization of the Arab Other in global cultural markets. The “aestheticization of difference” in today’s market economy, as Deborah Root puts it, amounts to no more than a packaging process in which presumably “authentic” (i.e., exotic) others are labeled and conveniently readied for large-scale distribution. “Cultural cannibalism” is in fact the central metaphor Root uses to describe “the West’s will to aestheticize and consume cultural difference” (xiii). More relevant to my thesis, however, is Root’s contention that exoticism is oftentimes the innocuous, aesthetic façade behind which the global, cannibalistic appropriation of cultural difference hides. She writes: “The way beauty and art have been used to justify a very wide range of cannibal behaviors is central to the notions of exoticism and appropriation” (17). Not only does exoticism anesthetize its keen consumers to the violence intrinsic in undifferentiated marketing of cultural difference, but it also bestows upon that violence a misleading aura of legitimacy and benign aesthetics. One may even suggest that the metropolitan discourse of exoticism, especially as it operates

in today's Euro-American media, often de-sensitizes its consumers not only to the spectacle of violence but also to the violence of the spectacle. Colonial (and neo-colonial) exoticism almost always operates under the cover of legislative aesthetics. To highlight the ways in which the discourse of exoticism is complicit with new forms of global cultural "exo-cannibalism" justifies my reading of the postexotic Arab as essentially a de-legitimizing trope in contemporary postcolonial fiction.

Western exoticism, Root also notes, employs a variety of tropes to describe non-Western peoples and cultures: violence, to describe Mexicans, Muslims, and Iroquois; primitivism, to describe Africans, North and South Americans, and Melanesians; sublimity, to describe Chinese, Japanese, Indians, and Sufist Muslims; passivity and timelessness, to describe almost all non-Westerners; and eroticism, the "most persistent" of all others, to describe Asians, Muslims, and Polynesians (Root 34-41). Taking this rather loose typology with a big grain of salt, I must note nevertheless how Arabs (who inhabit both the African and Asian continents) and Muslims in general feature in each of these tropes. What this tells us is that the Arab/Muslim Other, and by extension any culturally different Other, cannot be confined to fixed typologies and/or tropologies, not least because these are by definition unstable, ambivalent modes of representation. But what is interesting for my purposes is the inclusion of Muslims in that "most persistent" category of exoticism, namely, eroticism. Although she does not specify which Muslims are subjected to exoticist tropes, Root assumes that they designate mainly Arabs and perhaps Turks: "I included the Muslim world as a locus of European erotic desire primarily because of its status in this regard for the last two hundred years, from the fascination with the harem to Rudolph Valentino's sheik" (40). The eroticization of the Arab figure and the Arab harem, as Root and Edward Said both

suggest, is actually nothing new in Western exoticism, although now “the attractively, seductive Arab is increasingly replaced by the figure of the terrorist, who is always shouting or shooting someone and hence is too ‘fanatical’ to be appealing” (Root 40).

The scholarship that has been produced about Arabs and Islam over the past two decades or so is staggeringly copious, although not usually thorough and systematic. Most notable, however, are the works of the late French Orientalist Jacques Berque, the Middle-East experts Bernard Lewis and Raphael Patai, the anthropologists Talal Asad and Clifford Geertz, the Arabist-scholar Roger Allen, the historians Albert Hourani and Anouar Abdel Malek, and the late but indispensable Edward Said. Although topologically the Orient encompasses more than the Arab-speaking regions of the Middle East and North Africa, I read references to it in these studies as descriptive shorthand for a general typology in which the Arab embodies, *inter alia*, one of the numerous non-European subjectivities. Moreover, since the exotic is often the locus of the erotic, I venture to use both as interchangeable discursive categories synecdochally tied to the larger and more complex discourse of Orientalism.

It is undeniable that postcolonialism is typically associated with the name of Edward Said. And it is also *de rigueur* to turn to his oeuvre, and particularly *Orientalism* (1978), for a history of Western representations of Arabs. In what is by now a *locus classicus* in postcolonial theory, Said retraces the historical complicity between Orientalism and European imperialism—a complicity which he scrutinizes with no less wit and erudition in his later book, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Drawing on the Foucauldian dialectic of knowledge and power, Said claims that Orientalism as an institutionalized discipline produces a systematic, homogenizing alterity discourse that justifies and consolidates colonialist practices: “Knowledge of subject races or

Orientalism is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control” (36). Moreover, the Orient figures in the Western mind less as an actuality than as a *musée imaginaire*, a repertoire of tropes, textual formulae and cultural clichés bequeathed by one generation of Orientalists to another, so much so that “the very designation of something as Oriental involved an already pronounced evaluative judgment” (206). This Orientalist repertoire includes an entire panoply of truisms such as the mysterious/mystical East, the arid/enchanting Arab desert, the lecherous/aggressive Arab, the exotic/erotic harem, the cruel/lewd Sultan, and so on.

Said’s Orientalism and counter-Orientalism have engaged both admirers and detractors whose critical positions are as varied as their institutional affiliations, disciplinary practices, and political persuasions. Most of this post-*Orientalism* debate, however, has revolved around three basic flaws in Said’s thesis: its methodological infelicities, its essentializing pronouncements, and its failure to produce an alternative to that which it critiques. But my concern here is the way a number of critics have directed Said’s arguments toward a more focussed investigation of the exoticizing/eroticizing processes to which Arab iconographies have been subjected in Orientalist narratives. The Arab seraglio, for one thing, is revealed to be a persistent motif, the stylized eroticization of which has been repeated *ad nauseam* in both French and British Orientalism (Kabbani 18). In this respect, the works of Lisa Lowe, Malek Alloula, Fatema Mernissi, Ervin Cemil Shick, Mohja Kahf, and Ella Shohat, to name only a few, are particularly illuminating, not least because they expose to varying extents the all too subtle collusion of harem erotics and colonial politics. Building on

their arguments, I show how this collusion is dismantled through what I call the postexotic Arab.

The postexotic Arab in contemporary postcolonial fiction may be said to intervene in the traditional exoticist discourse in the same way that some eighteenth-century texts intervene in the Orientalist discourse at large. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1717-1718), for instance, "explicitly challenge the received representations of Turkish society furnished by the seventeenth-century [male] travel writers who preceded her" (Lowe 31). The works of male travel writers such as Robert Withers, George Sandys, and Aaron Hill, to name but a few, show Oriental/harem women as decadent, sexually submissive subjects. Montagu's easy admittance to the secret and immured world of the Turkish harem—a world usually undisclosed to her male compatriots—not only legitimizes her epistolary accounts of it but also allows her to challenge the racialized, androcentric Orientalist discourse by crossing it with the equally disturbing discourses of class and gender. Although Montagu's Orientalism seems to be steeped in a poetics of exoticism and homoeroticism, the value of its disruptive potential stems essentially from the proto-feminist subtext that cuts through it (Lowe 47-48). The Oriental Other in Montagu's epistles, as well as in Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721), thus occasions an allegorized critique of patriarchal hegemony both within and without the contours of empire (51). Similarly, I argue that the postexotic Arab, as it figures in the novels I examine, occasions a simultaneous troping and putting under erasure of the Orientalist *topos* of the exotic/erotic Arab.

Because it engages more explicitly with the eroticization/exoticization of Arab women in Orientalist literature, Leila Sebbar's *Shérázade* (1982) is the main focus of

Chapter One, “Odalisque Re-visited: Harem Erotics in Leila Sebbar’s *Shérazade*.”

Drawing on Fatima Mernissi’s and Malek Alloula’s works on harem erotics as well as on the work of other postcolonial critics and social theorists, I explore the ways in which Sebbar dramatizes the Franco-Algerian woman’s two-front struggle: one against cultural alienation caused by the lingering Orientalist stereotypes about odalisques and harems, the other against grinding social conditions exacerbated by high unemployment rates, poor schooling, inadequate social integration programs, and political disenfranchisement. Precariously trapped between a sense of entitlement to the liberal values of metropolitan France, on the one hand, and the desire to wrench herself free from the moral and cultural constraints imposed upon her by her local community, on the other, the Franco-Algerian woman inhabits a Bhabhian liminal space, a Deleuzo-Guattarian line of becoming, belonging neither to her country of birth (France) nor to that of her ancestors (Algeria).

Situating Arabness within its Franco-Maghrebian enclaves, this chapter explores the ways in which writers from these regions continue to grapple with the residual structures of coloniality and postcoloniality, of tradition and modernity, of (neo)Occidentalism and (neo)Orientalism. Postexoticism in Sebbar’s *Shérazade*, I argue, contributes to a politics of dissidence where the Franco-Maghrebian bi-culturality is conceptualized as a liberating and subversive subject position. Encoded within the context of Franco-Maghrebian cultural and literary production, postexoticism operates on two levels: first, it parodies the persistence of an Orientalist cultural imaginary that has its roots in France’s colonial history, and, second, it undermines the hegemonic structures of consumer economy that simultaneously perpetuates and feeds upon that imaginary.

Chapter Two, “Arab-Canadians and Multicultural Exoticism in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*,” teases out the disturbing nexus between multiculturalism and exoticism. Reading MacDonald’s debut novel, *Fall on Your Knees*, I highlight the cultural and existential implications of what it means to be a member of Canada’s many hyphenated migrant minorities. Surveying the main controversies around Canada’s state multiculturalism, I foreground the subterranean complicity between the latter and the oft-unacknowledged exoticist premises that underwrite it. It is because of the failure to recognize such complicity in a politically and socio-economically accountable way that Canada’s visible minorities continue to be confined within their ethnic pockets, unable (and not infrequently unwilling) to participate more fully in the nation-building project. In order to address successfully the politics of ghettoization, which multiculturalism is said to generate, one must heed the dangers of understanding ethnicity simply in terms of its referential value, that is, in terms of its external markers of difference such as dress, customs, skin colour, festivities, foods, names, and so on. In other words, visible signifiers of ethnicity must be understood as inextricably linked to the performativity of identity, an identity the full actualization of which might enter into conflict with and sometimes undermine the social and political cohesiveness of the nation. How and to what extent one can accommodate cultural difference without disrupting national cohesion remains one of the thorniest issues in multicultural discussions. This chapter hopes to be a productive contribution to these discussions.

In this chapter, I contend that a pseudo-colonial exoticist mindset continues to seep through the Canadian multicultural imaginary, creating what Stanley Fish calls “Boutique Multiculturalism”; that is, a multiculturalism that reduces ethnic cultures to

mere exotic commodities (foods, dresses, festivals, dances, music, and so on) to be enjoyed by mainstream society but that continue to inhabit its fringes. My reading of MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* aims at unveiling the discursive and ideological alliance between exoticism and multiculturalism, an alliance which I trace from its early-twentieth-century racialized, male-centered manifestations to its recent implementation as a state policy. While examining MacDonald's postexotic deconstruction of Orientalist conceptions of Arabs, I highlight the underlying culture industry which capitalizes on state-sanctified multiculturalism in order to commodify and disseminate profitably such conceptions. Examining key passages in *Fall on Your Knees*, I show how the multicultural paradigm often occludes historical and material relations of power and de-politicizes such issues as race, gender, and class by reducing them to mere abstract questions of cultural difference.

My final discussion in this chapter focuses on how MacDonald uses the Arab intertext in order to gesture toward ways of re-scripting the theoretical articulations of Canadian multiculturalism. Drawing on a Deleuzo-Kristevan theoretical model, I argue that MacDonald's postexoticism challenges the Orientalist premises of Canada's multicultural discourse. Her experimentation with pidgin Arabic toward the end of the novel illustrates how the semiotic and imaginative expansiveness of the literary might help conceptualize an alternative to the patriarchal, Anglo-centric overtones of the multicultural discourse.

The questions of multiculturalism and postcolonial hybridity are re-broached from the perspective of Eurasian historiography in Chapter Three, "Andalusian Poetics: Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and the Limits of Hybridity." This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section I offer a theoretical discussion of the

fatwa affair in relation to Rushdie's stance toward the recent rise of religious fundamentalism. Although perceived by some critics as an infelicitous shift in Rushdie's political allegiances, such a stance, I suggest, is emblematic of his growing concern about the role of art in undermining the logics of fundamentalist ideologies irrespective of their geographical emanations. *The Moor's Last Sigh*—although predating the 9/11 event and its concomitant “war on terror” discourse—articulates these concerns.

In the second section of this chapter, I read Rushdie's narrativization of the fall of *Gharnata* (Granada) and the Boabdil story as a seemingly exoticist nostalgia for a model of cultural hybridity that may substitute what Rushdie calls “the bogey of authenticity” plaguing India and several other postcolonial nations (*Imaginary Homelands* 67). The notorious story of King Boabdil's sigh at the loss of *Gharnata*, the last Arab-Muslim stronghold in Europe, to the Spanish conquistadors becomes metonymically linked to an exoticized Andalusian chronotope. In this respect, Rushdie's incorporation of Moorish history seems to indicate an exoticist nostalgia characteristic of fin-de-siècle exoticism, an exoticism in which the temporally and/or the spatially remote Other (in this case, Arab Spain) is thought to provide an alternative to the current anxieties of Home (see Bongie). On closer reading, however, one begins to realize how the nostalgia for an ideal multicultural hybridity built on the model of Arab Spain is ironically undercut by Rushdie's postexotic tropes. Such tropes, I argue, articulate his misgivings about the potential failures of certain forms of artistic hybridity. Rushdie's evocation of Andalusia as an ideal multicultural model to be emulated in strife-ridden India is coterminous with his scruples about the ironic possibility that some forms of Indian fundamentalism (political, religious, ethnic,

and/or artistic) may appropriate such a model for their own purposes. In the face of intractable religious fanaticism and political extremism, Rushdie intimates, such abstract notions as hybridity, plurality, multiculturalism, and liminal subjectivity may potentially be vacated of their historical significance and resistive value.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie expresses clear concerns about the limits of artistic hybridity in undermining the rising threat of political radicalism, interfaith terrorism, and caste politics. Focusing on the Boabdil paintings made by Aurora, the narrator's mother and a significant matriarchal figure in the novel, I argue that the popular motif of the lachrymose Arab king serves two main purposes: on the one hand, it helps Aurora develop her different imaginings of an Andalusian-style multicultural, secular India; on the other hand, it reflects Rushdie's doubts about the extent to which hybrid art, such as Aurora's, is able to preclude its potential recuperation by dominant discourses and radical political ideologies. Such doubts, I go on to argue, are signalled by the transmutation of the Arab king on Aurora's canvases from a glorified representation of the hybrid, the plural, and the secular into a dystopian figure of decay and degeneration—a transmutation that also mirrors India's relapse in the 1980s and 1990s into a quagmire of economic corruption, political turmoil, and interethnic violence. As such, the figure of the Andalusian Arab emerges less as an exotic symbol of a long-gone Andalusian Golden Age than as a postexotic reflection on a perturbed Indian *zeitgeist*.

Chapter Four, "Gastro-Exotics: Loss, Exile, and Signifying Culinaria in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* and *The Language of Baklava*," shows how Abu-Jaber uses food tropes in a way that problematizes the perception and consumption of ethnic culinary cultures. Both in *Crescent* and *The Language of Baklava*, food is repeatedly troped

against the background of exile, trauma, and historical memory. Memories of war, oppression, and displacement, I demonstrate, are carefully woven into the culinary narrative structure of the two texts under study.

Abu-Jaber's two works are important to my thesis because they deploy ethnic food not simply as a mere preserver and transmitter of cultural memory, but also, and more importantly, as a disruptor of the exoticist desire that drives its circulation and consumption in Western mainstream society. My discussion of *Crescent* focuses on food as a metaphor for both diasporic loss and collective mourning. Graphed into the history of exile, displacement and political oppression, ethnic food is divested of its exotic aura and acquires a parodic, political dimension instead. My discussion of *The Language of Baklava* explores the ways in which Abu-Jaber's autoethnographic discourse uses culinary tropes to achieve two main goals: first, to intervene in the growing popularity of (postcolonial) food memoirs in metropolitan markets, and, second, to undercut the exotic appeal of such memoirs by foregrounding the sense of historical and existential displacement at the heart of the North American immigrant experience.

Read side by side, these works reveal discursive exoticist patterns in the multi-sited constructions of Arabness. A critical inspection of the transnational configurations of such patterns through the conceptual prism of postexoticism uncovers the historical and socio-economic variables that inform the diverse literary and cultural productions of Arabness. The authors I study in this thesis are ever attentive not only to the discursive constructedness of personal, cultural, and national identities but also to the global relations of power and constant transnational flows of capital which play no small role in such constructedness. What makes these authors even more interesting is

the way they complicate their narrative investment in things Arab with their self-reflexive awareness of their own complicity in the culture of late-capitalism which they set out to critique. It is the self-reflexive, self-parodic quality of their literary endeavors, I argue, which brings into focus the inevitable and ever heightened tension between the oppositional and the complicit and which strategically places their work in a position where it can neither be recuperated (by the Center) as merely exotic nor condemned (by the Margin) as deliberately auto-exoticist.

Finally, I draw on these authors' strategic exoticism in order to emphasize the need to be attentive to the historical situatedness of one's intellectual endeavors. Therefore, my critical engagement in this thesis with such ideologies as Arab-Islamic essentialism, cultural neo-Orientalism, or Western economic liberalism is avowedly caught up in the same global network of inter-influences in which such ideologies operate. This conscious, historical self-positioning is crucial because it guards against an infelicitous relapse either into sealed-off logics of nationalist culturalism or into a blind complicity with a liberal-oriented ethos that might mitigate the energizing potential of one's appurtenance to one culture or another. Rooted in but also growing out of a current and personal anxiety about the consumer-oriented aestheticization and the undifferentiated consumption of Arab culture, this thesis proposes to re-contemplate the ethico-political responsibilities that postcolonialism faces while addressing the new historical and epistemological challenges facing that culture.

## Chapter One

### Odalisque Re-visited: Harem Erotics in Leila Sebbar's *Shérazade*

This chapter explores the ways in which Leila Sebbar re-inscribes modern Arab female subjectivity through a deconstruction of Orientalist and neo-Orientalist perceptions of it. Her novel *Shérazade* (1982), the first of a trilogy written over a ten-year period, engages with the exoticization/eroticization of Arab women in Orientalist visual arts and literature. The book tells the story of a seventeen-year-old French-Algerian teenager, Shérazade, who leaves her male-dominated home in France in search of her Algerian heritage. Extremely independent, charming but deceptive, cruel at times and tender at others, the eponymous heroine travels across the Parisian landscape of the 1980s, from the poverty-stricken immigrant-populated HLMs,<sup>1</sup> through the beauty salons of “the Parisian demimonde,” to the world of pornography magazines and the film industry (Orlando 162). During her back-to-roots journey, Shérazade meets and falls in love with Julien Desrosiers, an up-and-coming neo-Orientalist who introduces her to the perplexing harem world of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French Orientalist art. In the meantime, Shérazade participates in burglaries and hold-ups with her leftist roommates in the squat. The second and third volumes, *Les Carnets de Shérazade* (1985) and *Le Fou de Shérazade* (1991), respectively, continue the runaway’s journey through Lebanon and Israel—places where she meets with and endures intractable Arab Occidentalism and starts to realize that her identity does not reside in a single cultural heritage, either French or Algerian, but rather in a cultural interzone resulting from the cross-fertilization of both (Orlando 167).

This cultural interzone, or bi-cultural in-betweenness, corresponds to what Homi Bhabha calls the “Third Space,” or “interstitial space,” in which “[t]he cultural enunciation of difference problematizes the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address” (35; 36). In a letter to Canadian writer Nancy Huston, Sebbar insists on her hybrid subject position in France as a defining character of her indefinable identity and cross-cultural heritage:

Je suis Française, écrivain français de mère française et de père algérien..., et les sujets de mes livres ne sont pas mon identité; ils sont le signe, les signes de mon histoire de croisée, de métisse obsédée par sa route et les chemins de traverse, obsédée par la rencontre surréaliste de l’Autre et du Même, par le croisement contre nature et lyrique de la terre et de la ville, de la science et de la chair, de la tradition et de la modernité, de l’Orient et de l’Occident. (Huston 126)

I am French, French writer of a French mother and an Algerian father..., and the subjects of my books are not my identity; they are the sign, the signs of my history as a cross-breed, of a *métisse* obsessed with her own road and with crossroads, obsessed with the encounter with the Other and the Same, with the crossing of nature and the lyric of the land and the city, with science and flesh, with tradition and modernity, with the Orient and the Occident.<sup>2</sup>

It is this situatedness between two cultural poles, French and Arabic, or what Sebbar calls “ces points de juncture ou de disjuncture” (“these points of juncture or of disjuncture”) that she and many other Beur authors use as a strategic optic from which a modern, multicultural Franco-Maghrebian identity can be narrated and asserted (126).

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During the last two decades, noticeable attention has been given in postcolonial discussions to “Beur writing.” Beur writing refers to the corpus of literature produced by second- and third-generation Maghrebians<sup>3</sup> residing in France and dealing mainly with issues of identity, race, gender and the legacies of colonialism. Although the etymology of the term “Beur” remains the subject of much speculation, it is generally used in reference to the offspring of the early North African immigrants who had left their countries of origin and settled in France.<sup>4</sup> These first-generation Maghrebian immigrants were originally recruited as a valuable (that is, cheap) work force to “man the low paid, physically demanding and often dangerous work in mines, foundries, chemical works, refineries, tanneries and docks that the French refused to do” (MacMaster 4). Before the outbreak of the Second World War, France counted as “the largest presence of colonial workers in Europe,” especially Algerians (3).<sup>5</sup> During the 1960s, the number of recruited North African workers continued to increase as France still needed cheap manpower to help in the re-structuring of its soon-to-be consumerist post-World War Two economy. By the mid-1970s, however, the immigrant population in France reached such phenomenal proportions that the French government, further alarmed by the international oil crisis at the time, had to introduce more draconian immigration policies. Be that as it might, the fundamental concern revolved around the question of how to accommodate, culturally, economically and institutionally, a continually rising number of Maghrebian immigrants whose initial recruitment was only dictated by short-term economic demand but who were now establishing their families (through family reunions) and starting their lives anew in the French metropole (Blatt 42).

In the early 1980s, the descendants of this already established but still underprivileged Maghrebian proletariat had to face equally challenging difficulties. Commonly known as the Beurs, these young Franco-Maghrebians felt that they were born and raised in a country that not only seemed to have no future vision for them (Reeck 4), but that constantly pushed them out to the peripheral zones of “ghettos, second-rate schools, and juvenile detention centers” (Orlando 157). Unwilling to pursue their fathers’ menial jobs and convinced of their Frenchness (they all received formal French education and their knowledge of the Arabic language and culture was, in most cases, rudimentary at best), the Beurs began to voice their concerns and ask for better job opportunities and equal citizenship rights. The notorious non-violent 1983 “March of the Beurs,”<sup>6</sup> the appearance of anti-discrimination movements such as *SOS-Racisme*, the remarkable spread of regional Beur radio stations, and the formation of semi-militant Beur groups and organizations—all indicated the visible urgency of the Beur community’s predicament as well as the disturbing amplitude of its agenda as a major minority in the French Republic (Blatt 43). For about a quarter of a century, the Beurs have been the victims of alienating government policies, starting with Jean-Marie Le Pen’s right-wing anti-immigration electoral platform in the 1980s and the role the National Front has played in intensifying anti-Arab sentiment,<sup>7</sup> through the 1990 Law of Difference which further secluded France’s ethnic minorities at large,<sup>8</sup> to the more recent and much controversial CPE draft bill<sup>9</sup> presented to the National Assembly shortly after the youth disturbances and the subsequent roundups that took place in October and November of 2005 in many immigrant-populated suburban areas.<sup>10</sup>

The Beur struggle, however, is not simply a struggle for civil rights and political representation; it is also a struggle against persisting cultural misconceptions

about North Africans (and Arabs in general),<sup>11</sup> misconceptions that have their roots in the ethnographic discourse of colonial times and still loom large in contemporary French culture. The 1962 Évian Accords did officially seal France's withdrawal from Algeria, its last North African colonial outpost, but it did not end the deep-seated love-hate affair between the citizens of the French Republic and the "indigenes" of North Africa. A socio-cultural neo-colonialism in the form of marginalizing *idées reçues* and prevailing stereotypes continues to underpin Franco-Maghrebian relations up to this day. This form of neo-colonialism now operates within the French metropolitan center itself, where the Beur community is perceived either as a potential threat to national security or as an exotic commodity, at best, whose only value is a function of its marketability in an increasingly global economy. Trapped between two mainstream metropolitan discourses, one of criminalization (particularly in an increasingly Arabophobic post-11 September French society) and one of exoticization (particularly in a global market economy based on the production and consumption of cultural difference), the Beur subject teeters precariously in a liminal, threshold zone of non-belonging, torn between one inhospitable home *here* (France) and another nostalgically distant home *there* (the ancestral land across the Mediterranean).

The onerous rift in Beur identity, however, is often re-imagined as an empowering and creative element. As Begag and Chaouite metaphorically put it, the in-between position of second-generation Maghrebians in contemporary France carries within it the seeds of a fruitful future that needs careful tending in order for it to thrive:

Comme le fruit que porte l'arbre se détache un jour de sa branche et tombe sur le sol. En s'écrasant, il peut éclater et changer sa nature, et même donner naissance à de nouvelles pousses qui vont devenir à leur tour des arbres et ainsi

de suite. Par analogie, on peut dire que l'arbre et le sol constituent deux sociétés différentes qui exercent l'un sur l'autre des attractions réciproques, et les fruits, des individus qui passent de l'un vers l'autre. Autrement dit, les individus ne sont rien si on les isole de leurs contextes de référence, ici la France et le Maghreb, étroitement imbriqués l'un dans l'autre, et il est vain d'essayer de comprendre les processus de leurs migrations d'un espace à l'autre, les changements qu'ils provoquent et qu'ils subissent, sans analyser la nature, la topologie, les distances qui séparent et unissent les deux mondes. (19-20)

When the fruit one day falls off the tree branch on the soil beneath, it may burst and change its nature, and even give birth to new seeds that in their turn will become trees, and so on. By analogy, one may say that the tree and the soil constitute two different societies that exercise on each other reciprocal attraction, and the fruits are the individuals that move from one society to the other. In other words, the individuals are nothing if we isolate them from their referential contexts, France and the Maghreb closely imbricated one in the other, and it is useless to try to understand the processes of their migration from one space to the other, the changes that they provoke and undergo, without analyzing the nature, the topology, and the distances that separate and unite the two worlds.

Today, the Beurs are already on French metropolitan soil bearing the seeds of a new, but still amorphous, identity. Their original fall coincides with the early geographical (often deliberate) dislocation of their parents. When the first-generation migrants left their countries of origin three or four decades ago, they were undertaking what they thought to be only a temporary "stopover" in the colonial metropolis before the journey

back home. What they thought to be simply a transit zone now became, to their obvious disappointment, a permanent residence (Begag and Chaouite 20). Be that as it may, in the uprooting (*déracinement*) of the first-generation migrants may be seen the fruitful yet indefinable re-routing of a new and distinct Beur generation. Begag and Chaouite here insist on the genealogical unclassifiability of the Beur subject: “Je suis beur signifie je suis ni ici ni là. Inclassable. Non désireux de l’être” (“I am beur means I am neither here nor there. Unclassifiable. Have no desire to be”) (83). By virtue of its continuing shuttle-like bipolar movement between the traditional culture of *there* (North Africa) and the cosmopolitan culture of *here* (France), the Beur subject’s re-rooting (*enracinement*) cannot be but rhizomatic in nature, laterally diffusing itself across the metropolitan ground and creating a far-reaching, multilayered tapestry of transcultural influences. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define the rhizome as “an anti-genealogy” that defies the laws of “arborescent culture” and hierarchical structures (11; 15): “There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines” (8). The rhizome designates a set of “multiplicities” that move freely across a vast and multi-dimensional “*plane of consistency*” and establishes an intricate web of external connections and relations: “Multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities. The plane of consistency (grid) is the outside of all multiplicities” (8-9). Similarly, Beur subjectivity in contemporary French culture moves and develops rhizomatically. The Beur experience should not be apprehended simply in terms of its Algerian and/or French roots or filiations. For it is largely informed by a multiplicity of globally interconnected historical, political, and

socio-cultural determinants, and any attempt to arrive at an adequate understanding of what it means to be Beur in modern France must take into account such a multiplicity.

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Many countervailing factors, however, may stymie the expression of an autonomous and distinct Beur identity. Pressured to live out their parents' unrealized dream of return on the one hand (Begag and Chaouite 21) and facing a metropolitan society still clinging to the lingering Orientalist clichés of its colonial past on the other, the Beurs are trapped in a challenging two-front struggle. For a Beur subject in a French commodity culture, to inhabit a liminal space of non-belonging often turns into a strategy of coping and survival necessary to circumvent the objectifying forces of an economy that feeds on the global marketability of its culturally different Others. The Beur woman in particular, or the Beurette as she is often and slightly derogatorily called, is repeatedly exposed to this reifying, neo-colonial cultural economy. More importantly, however, the Beur woman finds herself caught between a feeling of entitlement to the liberal cosmopolitan French culture into which she was born but to which she is denied access—except, of course, as an object of the curious Western gaze and Orientalist desire—and the need to escape the restrictions imposed upon her by her filiative connection to the conservative Islamic tradition of her local community. Many contemporary Franco-Maghrebian writers, such as Abdelkébir Khatibi, Assia Djebar, Leila Sebbar, Tahar ben Jelloun, Hédi Bouraoui, Abdelwahab Meddeb, and Malika Mokeddem, amongst many others, have devoted their works (and their lives) to articulating an understanding of what it means to be a hyphenated citizen in contemporary France, of what it means to straddle two cultures (French and Arabic),

surrendering neither to the fetishist neo-Orientalism of the one nor to the traditional, die-hard Occidentalism of the other, but strategically drawing strength and self-knowledge from both.

Postcolonial conceptualizations of gender, multiculturalism, intersubjectivity, the Third Space, and agency are crucial theoretical and heuristic tools in the study of modern Maghrebian female identity. In *Nomadic Voices: Feminine Identity in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb* (1999), for instance, Valérie Orlando argues that by virtue of their exilic, public space of agency, postcolonial Maghrebian writers in France are able to engage in a “new cultural feminism” that allows the modern Maghrebian woman to transcend racialized and male-centered gender politics (7). The feminine, in contemporary Maghrebian writing, Orlando suggests, can be understood in terms of the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of the “becoming woman,” a concept that echoes a Bhabhian interstitial space (Third Space) of free-floating, intertwining, nomadic subjectivities. Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization of rhizomatic becoming is particularly cogent:

A line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes *between* points, it comes up through the middle [. . .]. A point is always a point of origin. But a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination; to speak of the absence of an origin, to make the absence of an origin the origin, is a bad play on words. A line of becoming has only a middle. [. . .] A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both. If becoming is a block (a line-block), it is because it constitutes a zone of proximity and

indiscernibility, a no-man's-land, a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other—and the border-proximity is indifferent to both contiguity and to distance. (293; emphasis in original)

The Beur subject moves along lines of becoming, that is, within an imperceptible, “nonlocalizable” border space, a space defined neither by its points of origin nor by those of its arrival. The “becoming-Beurette” thus designates a relentless process of rhizomatic deterritorialization, where all genealogies, roots, structures, beginnings, and ends are relinquished in favour of a perpetual middle—an “*intermezzo*” (Deleuze and Guattari 25). In Beur fiction in general, and in Sebbar’s novels in particular, the *intermezzo*, the state of “interbeing” (25), constitutes the proper trope of endless *fugue*.

In the becoming-woman crucible, notions of gender, race and ethnicity are dissolved; therein dissipates their tenability as predetermined, dialectical categories of identification:

The absence of binarisms, dualities, and dialectical poles within the Third Space opens up an imminent gulf that pulls into itself all bodies, whether animate or inanimate; all genders, whether male, female, or homosexual; all identities, whether Arab or French. These bodies, or elements, move and collide through energy and dynamics fusing into a new identity that constitutes a becoming. (Orlando 66)<sup>12</sup>

This “becoming-woman space of intersubjectivity” is a “space of destructured desire” where the habitual drive to dichotomize the world, that is, to construct it in terms of reductive binary opposites (man/woman, colonizer/colonized, black/white), is challenged, vacated, and ultimately made irrelevant (6-7). And it is in this kind of

space, Orlando goes on to argue, that female protagonists in Beur writing are allowed to circulate and to acquire a positive sense of feminine agency, defying the racial and gender politics that confines them to an otherwise immutable otherness. By recognizing and accepting her marginality and by celebrating her cross-cultural heritage, the Maghrebian Beurette enters a “new site of comprehension and knowledge” in which her active agency and productive negotiation with otherness become the principal pathways to the enabling polymorphous space of the becoming-woman (9).

In the work of feminist Franco-Maghrebian authors Assia Djébar and Leïla Sebbar, for instance, the notion of the becoming-woman plays itself out in perceptibly different ways. While in Djébar the becoming-woman space of liberating intersubjectivity is located in a female-inflected “historiographic metafiction” (Orlando 19), in Sebbar it is found in the concept of constant flight. Djébar expresses the possibility of a positive and active feminine agency by writing “totalizing narratives,” that is, narratives that re-tell or “recontextualize” Algerian history from an Algerian woman’s perspective (18). In Sebbar’s work, however, the trope of escape (*la fugue*) and the figure of the runaway/nomad (*la fugueuse*) become key elements in her conceptualization of the Beurette’s sense of identity. By continually fleeing the commodifying forces of French neo-Orientalism and the patriarchal restraints of Muslim tradition, the Beurette inhabits an un-chartable, nomadic space that helps her achieve an empowering “becoming-woman” status (20-21). Flight, in this sense, is the trope *par excellence* for the enunciation of the Beurette as an unremittingly becoming-woman.

In Sebbar's work, re-defining Franco-Arab subjectivity inevitably involves a critical engagement with the lingering influence of French Orientalist discourse. An "écrivain-croisée" ("border writer") practicing "écriture engagée" ("activist writing"), Sebbar appropriates the language and "idioms of the conqueror" (Pratt 7) to turn the discourse of nineteenth-century French Orientalism against itself. The book's title is the first site of such subversive engagement. Although the heroine's name is the only thing she has in common with her prototype, Scheherazade, it still invokes a recognizable Orientalist tradition stretching as far back as Antoine Galland's French translation of the *Arabian Nights* (1704) and indicates the epistemological power naming may have in colonial and postcolonial contexts.<sup>13</sup> Commenting on the book's opening scene where the name "Shérazade" is the subject of discussion, Orlando states that through "the simple notion of a name, Sebbar alludes to the power the former colonizer continues to exercise over its immigrant population, those who were most victimized by the colonial legacy" (159). In other words, the process of naming is often implicated in a colonial dialectic of knowledge and power whereby the colonized is relegated to a codified and easily recognizable and retrievable otherness within the colonizer's archive of knowledge (Said, *Orientalism* 36; 41).

My argument in this chapter, however, is that Sebbar's text needs to be understood as postexotic. By deliberately naming her heroine after the well-known, Oriental storyteller, Sebbar is able not only to explore the alienating neo-Orientalist clichés attached to the Beur subject in modern France, as Orlando suggests (159), but also to engage *critically* with the Western reader's store of Orientalist knowledge within the context of neo-colonial commodity culture. The title of the book and the exoticist subtext of the narrative can be said to fulfill two different functions: on the

one hand, the title seems to promote the book's own marketing by titillating the reader's desire to experience the pleasure of yet another exotic Arabian Night; on the other hand, the narrative *per se* disrupts that pleasure the moment the book is consumed (purchased and read), for what the reader discovers between its covers is not what he or she has originally expected but a disturbing parody of it.

Sebbar's novel illustrates the ways in which the Franco-Maghrebian writer's "weapons of criticism" are essentially "part of the historical legacy of empire" (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 245). Unlike Tahar ben Jelloun's texts, which, according to Jacqueline Kaye and Abdelhamid Zoubir, amount to little more than "exotic addenda to the French literary scene" (37), Sebbar's text eludes the allure of self-exoticization by relentlessly contesting the commodity culture in which it operates. Ever aware of the dangers of exoticist self-promotion, especially in a metropolitan market economy defined principally by its "cultural cannibalism" (Root 30), Sebbar often engages in what Huggan calls "*strategic exoticism*" (77; emphasis in original). Strategic exoticism designates a narrative trope employed mainly by peripheral writers to lure a metropolitan audience into a world of supposedly exotic otherness only to reveal disruptive Sameness therein. In this sense, the exoticist cliché becomes the very instrument of its own subversion. The postcolonial writer's stylized spectacularization of his or her "exotic" marginality within the colonial metropole partakes of an aesthetics of "*meta-exoticism*," designating the subversive intervention of "staged marginality" within Western/metropolitan consumer culture. With reference to Arundhati Roy's and Salman Rushdie's works, Huggan delineates the mechanisms of strategic meta-exoticism and its oppositional praxis:

Roy's, like Rushdie's, might be seen then as a *strategic* exoticism, designed to trap the unwary reader into complicity with Orientalisms of which the novel so hauntingly relates. It is also to some extent, also like Rushdie's, a *meta-exoticism*. In laying bare the grounds of its own material production—in examining the procedures that might lead to its own commercial success—Roy's novel helps reveal the link between the perceptual mechanism of the exotic and the metropolitan marketing of Indian literature in English in the West. (77; emphasis in original)

This chapter proposes to shed more light on how postcolonial narratives of parodic/subversive exoticism, such as Sebbar's *Shérazade*, can undermine the commodifying forces of a global economy while operating from within them. The modern Franco-Arab woman (the Beurette in particular) figures simultaneously as the immediate object of the metropolitan audience's neo-Orientalist desire and the unyielding agent of the text's postexotic manoeuvres.<sup>14</sup>

The opening scene of *Shérazade* is worth quoting because of its dual function: on the one hand, it foregrounds the history of French Orientalism as one of its major thematic concerns; on the other hand, it inscribes the book's first postexotic gesture by resisting the legacies of that history and emptying it of its epistemological and socio-cultural relevance to the modern multiculturalism of Beur subjectivity.

“Vous vous appelez vraiment Shérazade?”

“Oui.”

“Vraiment? C'est... c'est tellement... Comment dire? Vous savez qui était Schéhérazade?”

“Oui.”

“Et ça ne vous fait rien?”

“Non.”

“Vous croyez qu’on peut s’appeler Shérazade, comme ça?”

“Je ne sais pas.”

Il la regardait, stupéfait, debout de l’autre côté de la table haute et ronde du *fast-food*.

“Et pourquoi pas Aziyadé?”

“C’est qui?”

“Une très belle Turque de Stamboul que Pierre Loti a aimée, il y a un siècle.”

“Pierre Loti je connais. Mais pas Aziyadé.”

“Il s’est habillé en Turc et il a appris la langue turque de Stamboul pour la voir, en cachette. Aziyadé appartenait au harem d’un vieillard turc. C’était une jeune esclave circassienne, convertie à l’islam.”

“Pourquoi vous me parlez de cette femme? J’en ai rien à faire.”

“Elle avait des yeux verts, comme vous.”

“C’est pas une raison.”

Shérazade buvait son Coca-Cola à la boîte. Elle ne l’écoutait plus. (7-8)

“You’re name is really Sherazade?”

“Yes.”

“Really? It’s . . . it’s so . . . How can I put it? You know who Sheherazade was?”

“Yes.”

“And that doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“No.”

“You think you can be called Sherazade, just like that? . . .”

“No idea.”

He looked at her, standing [sic] the other side of the high, round counter at the fast-food, unable to believe his eyes.

“And why not Aziyade?”

“Who’s that?”

“A beautiful Turkish woman from Istanbul who Pierre Loti was in love with, a hundred years ago.”

“Pierre Loti I’ve heard of. Not Aziyade.”

“He dressed as a Turk and learned the Turkish language for her sake. He even went to live in the poor district of Istanbul to see her in secret. Aziyade belonged to the harem of an old Turk. She was a young Circassian slave, converted to Islam.”

“Why [sic] you telling me about this woman. She’s got nothing to do with me.”

“She had green eyes, like you.”

“That’s not a reason.”

Sherazade was drinking her Coke out of the can. She wasn’t listening anymore.

(1-2)

Julien’s reference to the notorious story of Pierre Loti’s adventures with his Turkish paramour, Aziyadé, is by no means gratuitous, for the name “Julien” is itself reminiscent of Julien Viaud, alias Pierre Loti (1850-1923), one of the founding fathers of French Orientalism, along with such figures as Eugène Delacroix, Théophile Gauthier, Eugène Fromentin, and Gustave Flaubert, to name but a few. The allusion to Loti’s *Aziyadé* (1879) uncovers a multi-layered Orientalist archive in which pseudo-

legendary love stories between Europeans and Orientals are writ large. From Alfred de Musset's Hassan and Rolla (a story to which Viaud, a.k.a. Loti, refers in his preface to *Aziyadé*), through Flaubert and his Egyptian courtesan, to Loti and *Aziyadé*,<sup>15</sup> the scene is saturated with intertextual allusions that point to an enduring French fascination with the purported "exotic" aura of the Oriental/Arab woman. A landmark of late nineteenth-century exoticist literature, Loti's *Aziyadé* tells a semi-autobiographical story of an ill-starred affair between a French naval officer, Loti, and a Circassian-turned-Muslim harem woman, *Aziyadé*. Set mainly in pre-Ataturk Salonica and Stamboul, the novel marks "the apogee of Loti's romantic dreams and the fountainhead of his lifelong Turkophile sympathies" (Blanch 104). Until he is commissioned back home, Loti enjoys his life *à la turque*, masquerading in Turkish accoutrements and going by the name of Arik Ussim Effendi so as to facilitate his secret nocturnal trysts with the green-eyed *kadine*. Because of its escapist, overly romanticized exoticism, *Aziyadé* is sometimes dismissed as the sentimental drivel of a French dilettante taking advantage of his political-colonial mission to live out his dreams about exotic Oriental women.<sup>16</sup> In the second book of Sebbar's trilogy, when Shérazade sneaks into Loti's bazaar-like house in Rochefort, she finds his "Orient de Prisunic" ("K-Mart Orient") pathetically cheap and calls him a "grotesque maniaque" (trans. in Hayes 231).

Julien Desrosiers, who later becomes Shérazade's undeclared lover, is the son of *pied noir* parents,<sup>17</sup> a connoisseur of Orientalist paintings, a passionate student of Arabic language and Maghrebian culture, and a gifted photographer and script writer. Obsessed by a "passion de la peinture orientaliste" ("passion for Orientalist painting") and by the "défauts sublimes du collectionneur" ("sublime faults of a collector") (20-21/16),<sup>18</sup> Julien sees in his chance encounter with this green-eyed Beurette a potential

for replicating a hundred-year old romance between a Muslim harem woman and a *Roumi* (non-believer) artist. Julien is mysteriously attracted to Shérazade, but his attraction is soon revealed to be steeped in a nostalgic exoticism characterized by a desire to re-live a romance *à la Loti* all the while recreating a modern version of the Arab odalisque for a film script on which he is working with other Parisian neo-Orientalists. Perplexed by Julien's peculiar quizzes, Shérazade faces an epistemic subordination in which she is at once the object and recipient of his all-encompassing, if disempowering, Orientalist knowledge. In fact, the opening scene dramatizes an epistemological imbalance in which the Westerner (Julien) is unmistakably the sole disposer of knowledge—knowledge of both himself and the Other (Shérazade). Julien's position as the all-knowing instructor relegates Shérazade to that of a disciple—albeit a bluntly indifferent one. Soon enough, the power of Julien's Orientalist knowledge is vacated of its relevance through the countervailing response of its unyielding recipient. Not only is Julien's quaint knowledge rendered inconsequential, but his learned textual and historical allusions also immediately fall flat, as Shérazade, the modern Coca-Cola-drinking Beurette, either hardly recognizes them or quickly dismisses them as irrelevant (“Pierre Loti je connais. Mais pas Aziyadé. [. . .] Pourquoi vous me parlez de cette femme? J'en ai rien à faire”).

As the story unfolds, Shérazade gradually, if disturbingly, learns that she has got more to do with Aziyadé and a host of other harem women (at least in Julien's eyes) than she originally thought. Julien is enchanted not only by the striking “Orientalness” of her name but also by the fascinating “exoticness” of her appearance and gestures that moved him “au point qu'il eut à se retenir au bord de la table” (“so much that he had to hold on to the edge of the table”) (13/9). Her wide green eyes, her

black curly hair, her round earrings, and her way of tying the second-hand quality scarf—all remind him of his favourite Orientalist painting, *The Women of Algiers* by Delacroix, a painting he never ceases to contemplate all the while reminiscing about his *pied noir* childhood in Oranie, Algeria. When both Shérazade and Julien eventually visit the Louvre to see the painting in question, he earnestly unravels his expertise and profuse knowledge of Orientalist art. Describing *The Women of Algiers*,

Julien [. . .] parlait de la rose dans les cheveux de la femme au narguilé, du *kanoun* au sol entre les trois femmes, des bracelets d'or à leurs chevilles nues, de la main de la belle négresse, la fouta noir et rouge à rayures serrée sur sa croupe au-dessous du court boléro bleu nuit, du regard de la négresse debout, sur ses maîtresses blanches et indolentes. Il racontait à Shérazade les femmes des harems, l'Afrique du Nord de Delacroix et de Fromentin, les ouvriers agricoles arabes et les petits colons qu'il avait connus en Algérie, les enfants des rues avec qui il avait toujours joué.

“Et la guerre?” dit Shérazade.

“Ça, c'est une autre histoire...”

Julien n'avait pas envie de parler de la guerre d'Algérie, après le Louvre. (13-14)

Julien talked of the pink in the hair of the woman with the hookah, the *Kanoun* [clay brazier] on the floor between the three women, the gold bracelets on their naked ankles, the beautiful Negress's hand, the black and red *fouta* with the narrow stripes round her hips below a short midnight-blue bolero, the way the standing Negress looked at her indolent white mistresses. He told Sherazade about the women of the harems, Delacroix's and Fromentin's North Africa, the

Arab farmworkers and the poor-white settlers he'd known in Algeria, the street children he'd always played with.

"And the war?" asked Sherazade.

"That's another story."

Julien had no desire to talk about the Algerian War, after the Louvre. (9-10)

Julien's homily on Orientalist art, imbued with a nostalgic evocation of his childhood memories in Algeria, is abruptly upset by Shérázade's reference to the Algerian war. One must note here that the action of the novel takes place only two decades after the eight-year-long Algerian War of National Liberation (1954-62), one of the bloodiest wars in Europe's colonial history, the painful memories of which are still haunting the Franco-Algerian collective conscious.<sup>19</sup> In the wake of the armed struggle for independence, about a million *pieds-noirs* (French settlers) were forced to flee the Algerian colony with "bitter feelings of exile and dispossession" (Hargreaves and McKinney 18). The unprecedented bloodshed that the war caused and the massive repatriation of the *pieds noirs* that took place in its aftermath engendered what Hargreaves and McKinney describe as a lingering large-scale "trauma of decolonization" from which contemporary France is still recovering (18). That Julien "ha[s] no desire to talk about the war" may therefore be justified by the unsettling feelings it evokes in him as the son of ostensibly Arabophile French settlers who were forced to depart from a colony they came to consider as "home"—or "second home," to say the least.

In the context of the novel, however, the inscription of Shérázade's unremitting interest in the war and Julien's unconcealed reluctance to evoke it within the same narrative space constitutes one of Sebbar's central postexotic tropes.<sup>20</sup> The Franco-

Algerian war is often conjured up in the novel as an untold, muted story, the spectre of which keeps pushing itself into Julien's neo-Orientalist world. Coming back from Drouot where Orientalist paintings have been put up for sale and heading toward the local library to meet up with Shérazade, Julien reflects on one of Chassériau's paintings, one that stirred in him the same emotional response as *Esther at her Toilet* and that was, much to his chagrin, bought that day by a wealthy English collector (Sebbar 74/78). The painting triggers a number of troubling questions to which Julien finds no adequate answers. He cannot seem to understand why he is often disturbed by the ubiquity in Orientalist paintings of the image of the "femme blanche à demi nue servie et célébrée par une négresse à turban rouge et or" ("semi-nude white woman, waited on and celebrated by a Negress in a red and gold turban") (75/78). He finds himself particularly disconcerted by the "exotisme d'artifice" ("artificial exoticism") of such paintings (75/79): "Il se disait qu'il fallait en finir avec ce trouble étrange qui lui faisait battre le coeur, chaque fois qu'il voyait dans un tableau orientaliste ces deux figures, si présentes dans la peinture occidentale du XIXe siècle, la Noir et la Blanche" ("He told himself he must get rid of this strange trouble which made his heart beat faster every time he saw these two female figures in an Orientalist picture, so ubiquitous in Western nineteenth-century painting, the one Black, the other White") (75/78-79). But no sooner does he enter the library and spot Shérazade "à sa place" ("in her usual place") (75/79) than he yields, as if in a trance, to the captivating similarity between the real-life Beurette sitting in front of him and the odalisque paintings, "the artificial exoticism" of which he called into question a short while ago. Even more ironic is the fact that while Julien is musingly following Shérazade's movements, unable to take his eyes off "ses boucles d'oreilles rondes et fines" ("her

delicate round earrings”) she is unexpectedly wearing that day, reminding him of the earrings that never cease to fascinate him every time he looks at Manet’s *Olympia*, Shérázade is occupied reading a book on the Algerian War of National Liberation. The libidinal drive of Julien’s undisguised gaze is ironically neutralized by Shérázade’s undistracted application to the study of Algeria’s war history (76/79-80).

The narrative juxtaposition of neo-colonial exoticist visions and references to concrete historical events, such as the Algerian War, constitutes one of the postexotic tropes that Sebbar deploys to puncture the lingering Orientalist stereotypes still informing contemporary French culture. On one level, Julien’s silence about the war indicates his desire to recreate, through Shérázade, the Orientalist world of the Arab harem, a world made inaccessible to him by post-war repatriation sanctions. On another level, however, one may argue that it also indicates the colonizer’s attempt to mitigate the violence involved in the colonial enterprise by confining it to what Silverstein describes as “an official collective amnesia” (207).<sup>21</sup> This attempted erasure of the war experience from official metropolitan historiography is re-inscribed in Sebbar’s text as “a fundamental *topos* in the transformation of Beur historical consciousness” (Silverstein 207). In fact, while Shérázade’s unflagging determination to know about the war intervenes in Julien’s neo-Orientalist nostalgic utopianism, it also helps her come to grips with the crossed history of her Beur identity. The juxtaposition of neo-Orientalist fantasy and the history of concrete colonial violence that underwrites that fantasy fulfills a twofold function in the novel: first, it creates an Orientalist dystopia in which a historiographical suspension of a “Loti-esque” exoticist motif is effected; second, it allows the author to write herself out of the exoticist discourse all the while operating from within its epistemological parameters.

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Back to the book's opening scene. It is a crucial Ur-scene, not the least because it inaugurates a series of other scenes wherein Western male desire for irresistibly erotic Oriental women is re-inscribed within postexotic dystopias parodying the consumer metropolitan aesthetics inspiring that very desire. Sebbar's *Shérazade* undermines the economy of neo-Orientalist reification in which the woman of colour in general, and the Arab harem woman in particular, is repeatedly subjected to androcentric, often coercive, eroticization. In an episode significantly titled "Jungle" ("The Jungle"), Shérazade and two friends of hers, Zouzou from Tunisia and France from Martinique, meet with a notorious fashion photographer at one of the parties they occasionally attend and accept his undeniably lucrative offer to pose for him. While shooting, the photographer gives impudent directives to which the three "beautés exotiques" ("exotic beauties"), as he calls them, do not take too kindly (152/163).

Il s'approcha d'elles et avec la dextérité du professionnel, il dégagea un sein ici, une fesse là, il échançra davantage le décolleté de Shérazade [...] "Vous êtes superbes. On aime beaucoup les scènes de jungle et de forêt vierge en ce moment [. . .]. Bon, on y va, les chéries ça ne vous choque pas au moins, oh! vous n'avez pas l'air bégueules moi j'aime pas beaucoup les mijaurées mais là toutes les trois... Vous ne seriez pas venue. Ça va être sublime. Alors voilà ce que vous faites, d'abord vous vous embrassez sur la bouche [. . .] et ensuite vous êtes allongées couchées l'une sur l'autre, à tour de rôle, c'est simple. Mais dégagez bien qu'on voie les seins, les fesses, il faut pas être pudibondes. Si vous étiez dans un sauna ou un hammam puisque c'est la mode, vous seriez toutes nues ça ne vous gênerait pas, eh bien là, c'est pareil." (154-55)

He approached them and with a professional touch bared a breast here, a buttock there, and pulled Sherazade's *décolleté* a bit lower. "You're fantastic. Jungle and virgin forest scenes are very popular at the moment [. . .]. Ok let's start, you're not shocked darlings I hope [sic], Oh! You don't look the goody-goody type I personally haven't much time for them and their airs and graces, but you three . . . You wouldn't have come. It's going to be fabulous. Well this is what you do, first you kiss on the lips [. . .] and then you lie down one on top of the other in turn, it's quite simple. But see that your tits and bums are visible, you mustn't be prudish. If you were in a sauna or a Turkish bath since that's the thing now, you'd be starkers and it wouldn't worry you, well now it's the same thing." (165-66)

The scene is a lewd, uncouth replica of a familiar colonial scene where the soldier-photographer penetrates the private site of the harem and instructs its inmates to expose their "exotic" bodies to his camera. The predatory act of shooting/taking pictures of the denuded body of the woman of colour is metaphorically equated with the colonial act of penetrating/confiscating the colonial space *per se*. As Hayes puts it, "[t]he photo shoot of exotic women becomes a safari during which the photographer/hunter shoots women/animals. And he 'takes' with an action resembling colonial expropriation" (223). On the one hand, the undisguised salaciousness of the modern photographer's instructions, especially his references to saunas and Turkish baths, shows how stereotypes about purportedly unchaste and sexually available harem woman (and "jungle" women, for that matter) are still ingrained in the metropolitan popular imaginary. On the other hand, such instructions betray an overly fetishist, sensationalist pictorial art complicit with a global economy of commodification in

which exotic and erotic images of non-Western women are reproduced for undifferentiated mass circulation and consumption.

The text's subversive, postexotic gesture, however, is inscribed precisely when the scopophilic desire of the white male consumer (symbolized here by the fashion photographer standing behind his camera) is disrupted by the girls' refusal to unveil more of their exotic flesh. Enraged by his prurient injunctions and seeing through his motive of selling their photos to private porn magazines, the three immigrant girls assert their independence, agency, and difference by threatening to shoot him with toy pistols, pistols they also use to carry out hold-ups with other leftist squatters. Pointing her fake .38 firearm at the photographer's camera, France makes a mockery of its androcentric power:

“C’est pas du cinéma. C’est des P.38. Vous connaissez? Les Brigades rouges qui tirent dans les jambes, vous connaissez? On va vous jambiser... – dit France toujours déguisée en tigresse véritable; elle poursuivit – Il y en a un sur les trois qui est chargé. C’est comme la roulette russe vous connaissez? On va tout foutre en l’air et on se tire. Si vous ouvrez votre gueule on porte une plainte pour incitation à la prostitution, proxénétisme caractérisé... On a des preuves. On vous connaît. D’ailleurs je me demande si on devrait vous descendre comme un chien.” (155-56)

“It’s not a game. These are .38s. You know what those are? The Red Brigade who go in for knee-capping, you know about that? We’re going to knee-cap you ...” said Sherazade [sic],<sup>22</sup> still disguised as a veritable tigress; she continued, “One of the three is loaded. It’s like Russian Roulette you know what that is? We’re going to screw up the whole show and scam. If you shoot your mouth

off we'll bring a charge against you for inciting to prostitution, unmistakable case for procuring . . . We've got proof. You're well known. Besides, I'm wondering if we shouldn't just shoot you like a dog." (167)

One can hardly miss here the parodic image of two rival phallic symbols, France's pointed weapon and the photographer's protruding camera viewfinder, vying against each other for power and control.

This contest for authority and control between the gazer and the gazed at is foreshadowed by another scene in the book. Shérazade, Zouzou, and France attend a party organized by local French yuppies and second-rate amateur artists and photographers. The décor is in Moorish style with "coussins soyeux disposés autour du palmier central, un vrai palmier à larges palmes très vertes, sans dattes, qui s'ouvrait vers les balcons intérieurs d'une loggia qui faisait le tour de l'immense pièce carrée, comme dans une cour ou plutôt un salon mauresque" ("silky cushions arranged around the central palm tree, a real palm tree with spreading green fronds, but no dates, which reached up to the balconies of a gallery which went all the way round inside the enormous square hall, like a Moorish courtyard, or rather salon") (123/132). Ironically, the music playing in the background is hard rock—a de-exoticizing element frequently employed by Sebbar to undercut what the reader might normally encounter in an otherwise exoticist text. No sooner have the three immigrant girls started dancing than they find themselves alone under the "date-less" (barren) palm tree surrounded by an admiringly gaping crowd. Admiration and enchantment intensify when Shérazade's name is eventually revealed: "Retenez-moi, retenez-moi ou je fais un malheur... C'est du cinéma ou quoi... La fille du grand vizir sous un palmier... je rêve..." ("Hold me up, hold me up or I'll pass out... Is someone putting on an act or what... The Grand

Vizier's daughter under a palm a tree... I must be dreaming...”), one of the on-lookers facetiously cries out (123-24/133). It does not take long for the entire partying horde to swarm around Shérazade “comme des groupies sur un podium” (“like groupies on a pop platform”) (124/133). Within the postcolonial metropole itself, and in the gaudy ersatz of a jungle/oasis-like Parisian apartment, one witnesses a no less crude re-production of the classical colonial scene in which the “exotic” Other is performing his or her native dance to the dazzled and titillated colonial tourist.

In *Shérazade*, this *à la native* posh Parisian festivity, however, is soon terminated by the native's reluctance to perform. One of the photographers has been stealthily taking a few shots of the unsuspecting, exotic-looking Shérazade and her two companions. Infuriated by his intrusive conduct, she snatches the camera, hurls it onto the ground, and scurries off, leaving him ranting against her and the likes of her: “la salope, elle me le paiera, si je la coince, elle me le paiera... ça vient où ça ne devrait pas, ça excite tout le monde, ça joue les allumeuses, ça pose avec les petites copines, des gouines encore celles-là et en plus ça détruit le matériel [. . .]. [E]t qu'elles retournent dans leurs pays ces petites garces” (“The bitch, I'll make her pay for it, let me just catch her, I'll make her pay for it... That sort turns up where they don't belong, gives everyone the come-on, just a bunch of prick-teasers, showing off with their pals, both lezzies, and then smashes people's property into the bargain [. . .]. And the little sluts can go back to their own country”) (124/134). The Beurette is welcomed into the metropolitan stage only insofar as she is willing to perform what the audience wants or expects to see, and any resistance on her part is met with typical racial abjection. The photographer's racial machismo, as Hayes remarks, indicates “how the uglier forms of racism and sexism can coexist quite comfortably with a so-called admiration for

‘exotic’ beauty” (222). Shérazade’s violent response to the photographers’ behavior, however, is a symbolic deflation of the phallo-centric libidinal drive of neo-Orientalist desire in contemporary French photography. “By attacking the camera,” Donadey remarks, “Shérazade hits where it hurts the most—literally below the belt. Her violence, as a response to violence of a sexual nature exerted against her, is experienced as sexually castrating” (131). Although she is willing to expose herself to the photographer’s camera in the second scene—for his offer is lucrative enough not to turn it down—she does so only on her own terms. In neither scene does Shérazade fail to prove her independence and intractable determination to do what she wants whenever and however she wants. Shérazade’s agentive independence is the means by which Sebbar deconstructs the epistemological continuum between classical Orientalist erotics and neo-Orientalist, scopophilic commodity culture. While they further reveal to Shérazade the vulnerability of her Beur identity as well as her unwillingness to compromise, the two aforementioned scenes also dramatize an Orientalist dystopia that parodies the archetypal colonial where the soldier-cum-photographer penetrates (quite successfully) the otherwise forbidden locus of the North African harem and captures (quite forcefully) eroticized images of its unveiled females.

That the erotics of colonial space and the politics of conquest oftentimes feed into each other is no longer an unfamiliar claim in contemporary postcolonial debates. Many cultural critics and postcolonial theorists have argued that the sexualized image of the Arab harem in particular all too often reflects an imbalanced (neo)colonial mapping of the world in which Self and Other are defined in terms of their respective sexual normality and abnormality. Using the case of Flaubert’s rather xenomaniac eroticization of the Egyptian courtesan in both *Voyage en Orient* and *Correspondences*,

Edward Said, for instance, demonstrates how the systematic sexualization of the Oriental/Arab Other is the by-product of unequal power relations and pre-determined knowledge formations (*Orientalism* 6). In *The Colonial Harem* (1986), Malek Alloula displays and critiques the ways in which the Arab/Algerian harem is subjected to the scopophilic tawdriness of the French colonial photographers of the 1920s. Along the same lines, Anne McClintock, in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), employs the concept of “porno-tropics” to refer to a “geometry of sexuality” in which the feminization of the virgin land and its ultimate penetration by the male explorer-conqueror are two inter-dependent colonial tropes (4). McClintock also argues that the gendering of colonial space is not limited to one unchangeable iconography. She remarks that “Arab women were to be ‘civilized’ by being undressed (unveiled), while sub-Saharan women were to be civilized by being dressed (in clean, white, British Cotton)” (31). The trope of penetrating the forbidden locus of the exotic harem, along with the desire to “unveil” its female inmates, whether they be Arab or Turkish, is also a focal point in Irvin Cemil Schick’s *The Erotic Margin: Sexuality and Spatiality in Alteritist Discourse* (1999). Adopting Michel Foucault’s Panopticon theory, he contends that the “eroticized depictions of Muslim women [. . .] are so often predicated upon the symbolic violation of the harem, the *making transparent* of its walls and of the veil” (15; emphasis in original). Sexuality and spatiality, Schick goes on to argue, become mutually defining elements in European erotic literature. More recently, Fatima Mernissi’s *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different harems* (2001) uncovers the will-to-eroticize as an abiding aspect in Orientalist/Western art with regard to representations of the Oriental/Arab harem and its inmates.

Because they deal more directly with the pictorial eroticism to which the Arab harem is repeatedly subjected, which is also a pivotal theme in Sebbar's novel, Alloula's and Mernissi's studies form the theoretical bases of my reading of *Shérazade*. In *The Colonial Harem*, Alloula showcases an annotated collection of postcards of Algerian women taken by French photographers during the early decades of the twentieth century. "Artifacts of popular culture," as Barbara Harlow calls them in her introduction to Alloula's book (xiii), the colonial postcard betrays the economy of scopophilic desire underlying the unveiling gaze of the colonizer. "The harem has become a brothel," writes Alloula. "It is the last avatar but also the historical truth of an Orientalism the presuppositions of which are no longer masked by the postcard [. . .]. Colonialism is indeed the final morality of Orientalism and exoticism. But it is the morality of a procurer and a bawd" (122). The colonial postcard's fabricated, crude exoticism—awkwardly staged by the French photographer and his Algerian models within the ersatz locus of the studio—shows how unfulfilled dreams of erotic adventure are often coextensive with desecrating deeds of empire, to borrow Martin Green's phrase. Paltry and mercenary though this pictorial exoticism may seem, it partakes, however rudimentarily, in an enduring French Orientalism the by-product of which is the dissemination, consumption and perpetuation of nostalgic/colonial images of exoticized/eroticized women of colour.

In his well-known essay, "Algeria Unveiled," Frantz Fanon equates the French colonist's unveiling of the Algerian woman—an act usually undertaken in the name of a *mission civilisatrice*—with the "destructuring of Algerian culture" as a whole: "Every new Algerian woman unveiled announced to the occupier an Algerian society whose systems of defence were in the process of dislocation, open and breached" (Fanon,

“Algeria Unveiled” 1161). Sebbar’s *Shérazade* not only shows how eroticized/exoticized Arab otherness functions as a cover beneath which (neo)colonialist relations of power lie undisturbed, but it also emphasizes the alienating psycho-social and economic repercussions of such relations on France’s Beur community. The year 1962 did end France’s military presence in Algeria, but it did not put an end to the marginalizing iconography propagated by the fin-de-siècle postcard exoticism to which the Algerian harem woman was subjected. In contemporary French culture, the same iconography continues to circulate, except that the Beurette is now its new main target. Such a commodifying iconography is complicit with a current global market economy that feeds on the distribution and consumption of exotic otherness. If “The Jungle” scene in Sebbar’s book is disturbing, it is because in its very tawdry theatricality is reflected the reality of an already alienated and “destructured” immigrant community. The unspeakable economic situation of Franco-Maghrebians in France and the lack of educational and professional opportunities conducive to their social and cultural integration often plunge young females like Shérazade and her two friends into an insalubrious cauldron of prostitution, pornography, robbery, and drug consumption. (Indeed, each and every Beur character in the novel has a story to tell about his or her predicament, a predicament exacerbated both by pressure from home where the father is usually a dominant patriarchal figure and by socio-racial constraints that prevent their growth into productively independent citizens of the modern Republic.)

Either captured by the camera viewfinder of the middlebrow colonial photographer or drawn by the paintbrush of the more refined Orientalist painter, the Arab harem woman is almost systematically reduced to exotic nudity. The unvaried

eroticization—and its correlate, de-politicization—of the Arab female is the subject of *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*, a semi-autobiographical collection of critical essays by the Moroccan-Arab feminist Fatima Mernissi. Mernissi's essays focus on a representative selection of Western translations of *The Thousand and One Nights*, translations in which Scheherazade's political shrewdness and talents as "super-communicator" are either minimized or lost in the exoticist literary flourish of the target text (41). Scheherazade of the West frequently dwindles into a de-intellectualized, de-politicized female figure, a mere exotic entertainer much like Flaubert's Egyptian *Almeh* or the French photographer's Algerian *Moresque*. Mernissi traces this tendency to downplay Scheherazade's intellectual powers back to an entire misogynist tradition in Western philosophy. Within this tradition, beauty, which is supposedly the "proper" female attribute, is achieved only through the relinquishing of sophisticated scholarly knowledge (90-91). Turning to Western visual arts, Mernissi attempts a "de-eroticization" of the Western harem. She claims that the erotic spectacularization of harem women has been a recurring motif in Western art—from Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's *Turkish Bath* and the *Grande Odalisque* through Delacroix's *Odalisque Reclining on a Divan* and *Femmes d'Alger* to Matisse's *Odalisque à la Culotte Rouge*. Ironically, Ingres's paintings, which became "the archetypes of Eastern eroticism," had been inspired simply by his reading Lady Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* and Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*, for Ingres himself "had never set foot in the Orient" (Kabbani 82). Even more ironic is the fact that while women in Turkey were being liberated by Kamel Ataturk at the turn of the century, Matisse, like the tourist-photographer in Alloula's study, was still languishing in delusional exotic eroticism, fantasizing about half-clad, breast-exposed odalisques

(Mernissi, *Scheherazade* 109). Echoing Said's counter-Orientalist views, Mernissi remarks that Western representational art frequently derives its power from the way it freezes its exotic Other into temporal fixity, something which explains why the twentieth-century Western harem is still disturbingly mediaeval.

Sebbar's *Shérazade* adumbrates and critiques the ways in which neo-Orientalist French culture freezes its exotic Others into fetishized, immutable commodities. After parading his remarkable private Orientalist collection of odalisques from Delacroix up to Matisse, Julien explains to Shérazade what "odalisque" means:

"C'est toujours des femmes nues?" demanda Shérazade qui entendait *odalisque* pour la première fois.

"Elle sont plutôt dénudées; à part celle d'Ingres qui porte juste le turban, celles que j'ai pu voir sont souvent habillées d'une sorte de culotte bouffante qui s'arrête au-dessous de la taille et parfois d'une chemise transparente qui laisse deviner les seins ou assez échancrée pour qu'ils apparaissent. Elles sont toujours allongées, alanguies, le regard vague, presque endormies... Elles évoquent pour les peintres de l'Occident la nonchalance, la lascivité, la séduction perverse des femmes orientales. On les a appelées *Odalisques* dans l'art du siècle dernier en oubliant que l'odalisque, dans l'empire Ottoman, l'empire turc, était simplement une esclave au service des femmes du harem royal." (189-90)

"Are they always naked women?" asked Sherazade, who heard the word *odalisque* for the first time.

"It's more that they're half-draped; apart from the one by Ingres, who only wears a turban, the ones I've been able to see are often dressed in sort of baggy

trousers from just below the waist and sometimes a transparent blouse that lets you make out the breasts or else is cut low enough to reveal them. They're always reclining languidly, gazing vacantly, almost asleep . . . They suggest for Western artists the indolence, voluptuousness, the depraved allure of Oriental women. They were called *Odalisques* in nineteenth-century art, forgetting that an odalisque in the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Empire, was simply a servant, a slave waiting on the women of the royal harem." (203)

Ironically enough, Julien becomes as obsessed with Shérazade's exotic appeal as his Orientalist predecessors had been with that of their odalisques. Although he sounds slightly critical of the Orientalists' lack of aesthetic and historical accuracy, his own fixation on Arab concubines and pictorial representations of them differs not in kind, but in degree. Taking numerous pictures of Shérazade and pinning them to his apartment walls, Julien recreates and perpetuates the same iconography of the exposed and eroticized Arab odalisque which he has inherited from nineteenth-century Orientalist painters as well as from early twentieth-century lowbrow colonial photographers.

Julien's love for Shérazade smacks of a collector's passion for rare objects. In "Unpacking My Library," Walter Benjamin offers an insight into the "mysterious" relationship between the collector and his possessions. On the spirit of a book collector, for instance, Benjamin writes:

[The collector's] existence is tied to [. . .] a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate. The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic

circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them. Everything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property. The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership—for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object. (60)

For the collector, not only original books have fates but also copies of them, and “the most important fate of a copy is its encounter with him, with his own collection” (61). Julien finds himself at pains trying to explain a maniacal urge to get his hands on a rare watercolour now hanging on his wall and depicting an unveiled Arab/Berber woman holding a baby. He tells Shérazade,

“J’étais très malheureux et je me sentais prêt à acheter n’importe quoi, pourvu qu’il y ait une femme algérienne... Une femme arabe.”

“Mais qu’est ce que tu as avec ces femmes-là?”

“Je les aime.”

“Tu les aimes en peinture?”

“Oui, c’est ça...je continue.” (Sebbar 98)

“I was miserable and felt prepared to buy anything as long as it had an Algerian woman ... An Arab woman.”

“But why are you so keen on all those women?”

“I love them.”

“You love pictures of them?”

“Yes that’s right . . . Let me finish.” (Sebbar 104)

What attracts Julien to Shérazade is the striking resemblance she bears to the Arab odalisques in many French Orientalist paintings. For him, she represents a living copy of a host of other Orientalist originals found in translations of the *Arabian Nights*, in Pierre Loti's oeuvre, and in many other Orientalist paintings. And the "final thrill" for him is that in the acquisition of this copy there may occur the re-birth, re-incarnation, of the original, in the same way that the re-birth of an old book lies in the collector's acquisition of it (Benjamin 61). In Julien's eyes, Shérazade symbolizes a modern picture of the old odalisque, a picture to be added, along with other items, to the "magic encyclopedia" of his neo-Orientalist exotica.

Both Orientalists and collectors are xenomaniac antiquarians who seek to preserve a remote, purportedly "golden" age through the acquisition of its most symbolic artifacts. For them, the artifact's material value in the present resides in its symbolic relation to the past, and the ultimate fulfillment of that relation occurs when the artifact comes into their possession. Julien is a neo-Orientalist collector who seeks to recuperate what he nostalgically regards as an "authentic" Orientalist era in Franco-Algerian history, an era foreclosed by the repatriation decree and the residual aura of which is now threatened to be eroded by the tide of mass consumer culture in metropolitan France.<sup>23</sup> For him, Shérazade is the living artifact of a golden (i.e., Orientalist) French-Algerian epoch, not the living evidence of an alienated immigrant community. In her body he witnesses the scene of a vanishing Orientalism, rarely the mark of an estranged Beurette seeking self-knowledge and recognition. His lack of interest in the social and cultural motivations of her "fugue" (her escape), namely, to flee conservative paternal oppression at home and racial stereotyping outside, aligns him with the two porn-magazine photographers mentioned earlier, except that his

interest in her is of a more refined aesthetic order than theirs. This time she is to feature in his film, "*La banlieue c'est beau*" ("*The Suburbs are Fine*"), as a heroine from the poverty-stricken Parisian quarters. The film director wants her to be named Zina—meaning beautiful in Arabic—"une chef de bande, une rebelle et poète, une insoumise habile au couteau, efficace en karaté (comme sa première héroïne taxi), intrépide et farouche, une mutante des Z.U.P., une vagabonde des blocs, des caves, des parkings et des rues, imprenable et redoutable comme un chef de guerre" ("a gang leader, rebel, poet, unruly, adept with a knife, expert at karate (like his first prostitute heroine), fearless, fugitive from ZUPs, hanging around housing estates, basements, underground car parks, wandering in the streets, as illusive and frightening as a war-leader") (218-19/236). But above all, he insists, she must have green eyes, "vraiment verts pas gris-vert ou bleu-vert" ("really green, not grey-green or blue-green") (217/234).

True, the film deals with the appalling social and economic condition of the French ZUP quarters and their immigrant population,<sup>24</sup> but its ultimate success, as the film director intimates, will definitely depend on the authenticity of its cast's ethnic "exoticness"—on its heroine's green eyes, the very green-eyes that mesmerized Julien and reminded him of Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger* and of the larger-than-life Loti and Aziyadé when he saw Shérazade for the first time at the fast-food.<sup>25</sup> The squalid immigrant life that the film promises to depict ends up consolidating the popular myth of the immigrant's untiring struggle against the "*galère perpétuelle*" ("perpetual dog's life") in the metropolis, as the director puts it (219/236). It is the myth of the immigrant who is destined to brave the odds, because he or she is not sophisticated enough to be able to "catch up" or "make it," as it were, in an advanced cosmopolitan

society. Ironically, however, it is the very squalidness of the immigrant life that becomes the locus of the exotic, where a blend of beauty and squalor, or rather beauty *in* squalor, becomes a highly saleable recipe in an “exo-cannibalistic” market economy (Root 30). To witness the gangster stunts of a green-eyed Beurette, of an odalisque turned desperado, is definitely a thrilling spectacle for an urbane audience eager to “spice up” its otherwise routine-ridden, but distantly secure, lifestyle.

The film director’s search for an “authentic” ethnic movie star and Julien’s antiquarian obsession with green-eyed harem models are simply more aestheticized configurations of the same pictorial exoticism critiqued in Alloula’s study. The dynamic of this colonial exoticism and its perpetuation in postcolonial metropolitan culture is immediately destabilized when Shérazade, after a long and exhausting audition for the new film, retires to a corner in the studio where she chances upon a book of colonial photographs taken during the Algerian Revolution. The photographs show

visages des femmes dévoilées devant l’appareil photographique que manipulait le Français soldat-photographe, pour le recensement de plusieurs villages de l’intérieur, ces visages avaient la dureté et la violence de ceux qui subissent l’arbitraire sachant qu’ils trouveront en eux la force de la résistance. Ces Algériennes avaient toutes devant l’objectif-mitrailleur, le même regard, intense, farouche, d’une sauvagerie que l’image ne saurait qu’archiver, sans jamais la maîtriser ni la dominer. Ces femmes parlaient toutes la même langue, la langue de sa mère.

Shérazade feuilletait l’album photographique et les larmes coulaient, malgré elle. (220)

Faces of women not wearing veils in front of a camera held by a French soldier, taking pictures for the census of several villages in the interior... these faces displayed the severity and violence of people who submit to arbitrary treatment, knowing they will find the inner strength to resist. These Algerian women all faced the lens as if they were facing a machine-gun shooting them, with the same intense, savage stare, a fierceness that the picture could only file for posterity without ever mastering or dominating. These women all spoke the same language, her mother's language.

Sherazade turned the pages of the collection of photographs and in spite of herself the tears streamed down her face. (237-38)

By virtue of symbolic narrative retrospection, the director's camera in the metropolitan studio joins that of the French soldier in the colonial harem and both transform into a machine-gun to whose androcentric shot Shérazade of the ZUPs and the unveiled woman of the Algerian colony become the common target. The ubiquity of harem iconography becomes unbearably disturbing for Shérazade particularly when she realizes that her predicament is not any better than that of the exposed, yet plainly unyielding, Algerian women in the colonial photographs, and it is her detection of that unflinching stare of resistance in these women's eyes that gives her the "inner strength to resist" and the resolve not to compromise. In fact, the more she delves into Julien's arcane neo-Orientalism, the more determined she becomes to uncover its roots by re-discovering the colonial soil where it was first planted (Algeria) and is now threatening to shape her identity in France. By uprooting the Orientalist stereotype, Shérazade attempts a re-routing of her own identity, a process whereby she discovers the ineluctably rhizomatic, cross-cultural nature of that identity.

Only insofar as it does not compromise her Beur identity does Shérázade accept to return Julien's love. Although their love for each other is genuine, she returns it only on her own terms. Defiantly forestalling his efforts to re-create her into the image of an Orientalist's Arab odalisque or to promote her as an attractively rebellious HLM Beurette, she tears off the photographs he took of her to decorate his apartment: "J'en ai marre de voir ma gueule partout, tu comprends... tu as pas besoin de moi vivante, finalement..." ("I'm sick to death of seeing my mug everywhere, you understand... you don't need me in the flesh after all"), she remonstrates (158/169-70). And before she leaves him to embark on her journey to Algeria, she writes him a note on a scrap of paper that reads "je ne suis pas une odalisque" ("I'm not an odalisque") (206/222). Shérázade then visits the Beaubourg library where she finds a special exhibition of Orientalist paintings. Among these is Henri Matisse's *Odalisque à la Culotte Rouge* (*The Odalisque in Red Trousers*) (1922). After contemplating the painting, she buys from the gift shop all the remaining odalisque postcards (246/265) and dispatches one of them to her friends Zouzou and France with a little note scribbled on the back of it: "C'est à cause d'elle que je m'en vais" ("It's on account of her that I'm going") (252/272).

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Sebbar's novel engages with contemporary French neo-Orientalism in such a way as to unsettle its lingering stereotypes while highlighting its deleterious impact on a thriving Beur community. Shérázade's search for an independent, self-determined identity is evident in her adamant refusal to be cast into a pre-fabricated, exoticist mould. Her "becoming-woman" process is set in motion as she learns how to circumvent,

sometimes openly defy, the commodifying forces of popular culture (represented by the two porn-magazine photographers) and the complicit aesthetics of neo-Orientalism (represented by Julien and the film director). Adrift between the mystifying exoticism of painters like Ingres, Delacroix, Renoir, and Matisse and their eroticized harem odalisques—all introduced to her by Julien—and the nostalgic pull of the real-life Algeria of her childhood memories—also instigated by her conversations with Julien and by her personal readings at the local library—*Shérazade* comes to embody the modern French-Algerian woman's crisis of identity. Her decision to re-discover her ancestral land must nevertheless suggest that “no return to a postcolonial authenticity or prediasporic experience can occur” (Hayes 231). For such a return symbolizes only one viable form of resisting the neo-Orientalist mindset in contemporary white French culture before assuming fully and assuredly her “becoming-woman” position as a free, actively independent cross-cultural Beurette. In *Shérazade*, the deterritorializing-reterritorializing of Beurette subjecthood is enabled by Sebbar's deployment of postexotic tropes that salvage her as a border writer from the dangers of self-exoticization while dismantling the erotically charged image of the Arab odalisque.

## Chapter Two

### Arab-Canadians and Multicultural Exoticism in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*

This chapter proceeds in two directions. First, it offers a general overview of critiques of multiculturalism along with a theoretical enquiry into the apparently innocuous complicity between exoticist discourse and multiculturalist ideology: as two alterity discourses, exoticism and multiculturalism grow into the discursive and ideological shadow of each other, and their covert complicity more often than not engenders a politics of ghettoization partaking of a large-scale global economy of cultural commodification. Second, the chapter reads Canadian author Ann-Marie MacDonald's critically acclaimed and international bestseller *Fall on Your Knees* (1996) with a view to highlighting the author's deployment of postexotic tropes that uncover and disrupt the neo-exoticist subtext underwriting Canadian multiculturalist discourse. Intervening in what Stanley Fish identifies as "boutique multiculturalism" in metropolitan societies, MacDonald re-examines the cultural and political implications of Canada's ethnic diversity within the framework of a male-centered, consumer-oriented culture industry undergirded by multiculturalist ideology. Postexotic tropes, in this respect, not only parody masculinist, consumer-oriented spectacularizations of ethno-cultural difference in Canada, but they also expose the ways in which multicultural policy may become the subterranean handmaiden of the discourse of exoticism, in the same way that the latter has itself been an ideological and representational accomplice to Western ethnographic discourse during colonial times. More specifically, I read the figure of the Arab in MacDonald's book as representing a cultural otherness whose exoticization (and

sometimes self-exoticization) gestures toward the potential complicity that obtains between the discourses of multiculturalism and exoticism on the one hand and the hegemonic structures of the global commodity industry on the other. The chapter then ends with a Kristevan-Deleuzian reading of the Arab intertext in MacDonald's book by way of emphasizing the crucial significance that MacDonald attaches to language in the construction of subjective identity in a multicultural context.

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Since its transformation from a federal statute to a constitutional law in 1988, multiculturalism in Canada, whether as an ideology, a government policy, a social awareness or a cultural practice has constantly been the subject of profound contention. One of the rehearsed critiques of multiculturalism concerns what one might call its "measured openness":<sup>26</sup> the multicultural model is often said to promote exclusionary and compartmentalizing practices under the guise of liberal notions of individual freedom, tolerance and the right to be different. The much cherished idea of allowing full identification and recognition of ethno-cultural differences often slips into an unwitting politics of exclusion or what Tom Tancred aptly describes as "a pseudo-intellectual rationale for cultural tribalism" (7). Multiculturalism designates the individual's right to identify with and to participate in the culture that he or she chooses, and this only to the extent that such identification and participation "do not contravene the laws of the land or interfere with the rights of others" (Fleras and Elliott 141). But the fundamental question remains disturbingly unresolved: "Where do we draw the line between what is acceptable and what is not?" In other words, how do we determine the extent to which "a multicultural system can incorporate [diversity]

without undermining the social fabric of society” (141)? The turban affair is here a notorious case in point. The federal government’s ruling in favour of the wearing of the turban by Sikh RCMP officers clearly divided the Canadian public into supporters and detractors. The bottom line is that while the federal government’s decision indicates a commitment to implement the principles of multiculturalism by incorporating cultural diversity into its political institutions, the knee-jerk adverse reaction among many Canadians shows the extent to which they are still unwilling to move multiculturalism beyond self-congratulatory recognition and superficial celebration of exotic cultures and to integrate it in more profound ways into the Canadian political and institutional fabric (143).

Although recognized as a groundbreaking government initiative aimed at managing Canada’s ethnic and racial diversity, multiculturalism remains the target of much criticism. Augie Fleras and Jean Leonard Elliott, for instance, argue that official multiculturalism creates socio-cultural schisms among its communities by “fostering an inward-focused mentality, especially through hyphenated references to ethnic groups which may be a subtle form of racism and a constant reminder that people are not yet considered Canadian” (133). Multiculturalism often elides serious issues, such as distribution of government resources and political representation, through an exaggerated interest in “quaint ethnic festivals and customs” (134). In other words, multicultural policy tends to occlude the vital issue of institutional and political representation of ethno-racial groups through an overemphasis on their filiative ties to their respective heritage cultures. Lastly, and probably most crucially, Fleras and Elliott note that multiculturalism is sometimes viewed as an impractical government policy, not the least because it leaves unaddressed the far thornier issue regarding the

extent to which ethnic diversity can be accommodated in a highly multicultural society such as Canada. Many questions arise here. Could widely diverse ethnic groups achieve an agreement on collectively predetermined values necessary for the formation of cohesive and united national identity? This may be an appealing ideal in theory, but is it feasible in a highly pluralistic, liberal-democratic society such as Canada? Furthermore, who gets to decide on those values, on what bases, and for what and whose purposes (Fleras and Elliott 139)?

Neil Bissoondath's book, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994), provides perhaps the most notoriously forthright critique of multiculturalism as a social policy, yet it clearly falls short of offering adequate answers to the aforementioned questions. The Multiculturalism Act, Bissoondath maintains, was more a political manoeuvre undertaken by an increasingly unpopular and failing government to win ethnic votes and to subsume the notorious "Quebec business" (as René Lévesque described it) under the ethnicity issue than "a progressive social policy" dictated by "necessary social accommodation" (36-37). Multiculturalism was institutionalized at a crucial historical juncture when the "Trudeaumania" of the late 1960s, inspired mainly by the America of John and Robert Kennedy, "was transforming itself into Trudeaphobia" as early as the 1970s. Scrutinizing the content of the Multiculturalism Act, Bissoondath singles out a number of deficiencies in its rhetorical and ideological formulations. The legislation, he contends, betrays a number of unwarranted presuppositions, namely, that immigrants are frequently inclined to preserve their heritage cultures, that worldviews and attitudes are constant, and that viewing "newcomers as exotics" is not as much of an anathema as it is thought to be. Moreover, the hasty introduction of the Multiculturalism Act not only indicates a "lack

of long-term consideration,” but it also bespeaks an “opportunism that underlay it all” (39). Multiculturalism also creates what Bissoondath, echoing Salman Rushdie’s phrase, describes as “homelands of the mind”: “We have, in this country, accepted with little hesitation the psychology of separation. We have, through the practice of multiculturalism, created a kind of psychic apartheid, the homelands of the mind Salman Rushdie has warned us about” (152). By enhancing and preserving the immigrants’ ties with their heritage culture, multiculturalism may unfortunately end up solidifying their loyalty and allegiance to the old homeland, all the while distancing them further from the ideals of the adopted country. As a result, Bissoondath suggests, many immigrants come to see the attainment of Canadian citizenship less as an opportunity to participate more fully in the political process than as “a passport that allows return to the (dis)comfort of the former or ancestral homeland with the assurance of safe haven should plans go awry, or should political instability necessitate flight” (121). In addition to its negative role in transforming citizenship into a matter of individual and familial convenience rather than national commitment, multiculturalism often inculcates, and sometimes legitimates, a “culture of victimhood” among its ethnic communities, especially those who happened to suffer from massive historical oppression, such as Jews and Blacks. The characteristic Canadian “[f]ear of giving offence” (167), Bissoondath argues, has created a “culture of victimhood [that] is composed of conceit and theatre, the threads of which stitch themselves through the ideas of multiculturalism” (159). Multiculturalism in Canada has become an index for a “‘reward system’ for historically marginalized groups” that either reject it as overly patronizing and condescending or exploit it as legitimate grounds to exact from the

government more “financial reparations for historical wrongs” (Huggan 131; Bissoondath 123-31).

Bissoondath’s critique of multicultural policy is nowhere more vitriolic than when he exposes its complicity with the discourse of exoticism. Emphasizing the need to encourage and conserve cultural difference may “turn ethnic communities to museums of exoticism” or “little outpost[s] of exoticism preserved and protected” (101). This obsession with the need to preserve one’s heritage culture through state-sponsored celebrations and rituals may lead to what Bissoondath describes as “the simplification of culture.” A disturbingly unacknowledged corollary of multicultural policy, the simplification of culture designates “a devaluation of culture, its reduction to bauble and kitsch” or to a commodity “shaped and packaged to give a voyeuristic pleasure” (75-77). On the other hand, however, this exoticism can be a “game” that “cut[s] two ways”: while it allows an ethnic individual to “enjoy” his or her exoticness and even to profit from it by playing it up, it also “prevent[s] that same individual from being accepted” or “from being ordinary” (106). Using Ben Johnson’s Olympic scandal as a case in point, Bissoondath elaborates on the exoticist double-bind in which some “professional ethnics” find themselves:

Within a shattering twenty-four-hour period in Seoul, Korea, Mr. Johnson went in media reports from being the Canadian who had won Olympic gold through effort to the Jamaican immigrant who had lost through use of drugs. The only thing swifter than Mr. Johnson’s drug-enhanced achievement was his public demotion from “one of us” to “one of them.” The exotic multicultural concept of the ever-lasting immigrant has come to function as an institutional system for the marginalization of the individual: Ben Johnson was, in other words, a

Canadian when convenient, an immigrant when not. Had he, success or failure, been accepted as being simply Canadian and not “Jamaican-Canadian,” it would have been difficult for anyone to distance him in this way. Thus the weight of the multicultural hyphen, the pressure of the link to exoticism, can become onerous—and instead of its being an anchoring definition, it can easily become a handy form of estrangement. (106-07)

As such, the simplification of culture becomes bound up with an exoticism of convenience, suggesting that cultural difference and its various signs are embraced or rejected depending on whether or not Canada’s world image is at stake. Therefore, it is only a case of “polite discrimination,” for instance, when the media decides “to publish the racial background of victims or offenders, even though this information may be ‘irrelevant’ to the story” (Fleras and Elliott 244).

While Bissoondath critiques state multiculturalism for not being assimilationist enough, his ultimate plea for “a cohesive, effective society enlivened by cultural variety” still leaves much to be desired (240). For he hardly answers the fundamental question pertaining to the extent to which a multicultural society like Canada can be animated by cultural difference without disrupting the cohesiveness of its national identity. The question of whether or not there should be “moral limits on the legitimate demand for political recognition of particular cultures” also remains moot in Bissoondath’s study (Gutmann 5). While taking to task multiculturalism for overlooking the society’s capacity to accommodate cultural difference without threatening its national unity, Bissoondath fails to address, much less reconcile, the seemingly irreconcilable, but ultimately related, principles of individual freedom and the right to be different on the one hand and the requirements of a collective and

cohesive national identity on the other; in other words, he simply iterates the same theoretical dilemma by reversing its underlying premises, giving precedence to national cohesion over cultural variety: “*reasonable* diversity within *vigorous* unity” (240; emphasis added).<sup>27</sup> And what he advances as an ostensible solution for this dilemma seems to be little more than an acrobatic back flip to the founding and long-prevailing precepts of Western Humanism: “Is there a point,” Bissoondath asks, “at which diversity begins to threaten social cohesion?” (40). What determines social cohesion: skin colour, race, and/or shared values? “What makes a better neighbour,” he asks more assertively, “a man of colour who shares your basic values or a man of any colour who does not? Culture, in its essentials, is about human values, and human values are exclusive to no race” (65). Needless to say, by “basic values” Bissoondath means the unassailably “essential notions of humanity” that presumably all humans are expected to share and respect, irrespective of language, race, religion, or gender (65). But who gets to decide, one may respond, what those notions are and which and whose standards are applied to judge on their inherent value?<sup>28</sup>

The evocation of the supposed universal elements that *unite* us as rational human beings, rather than those specific cultural practices that *distinguish* us from one another only externally (or so the argument goes), may be ethically and philosophically appealing. But does it necessarily apply to those ethnic communities whose self-understanding and self-realization derive precisely and principally from the very practices of their respective cultures, practices that the liberal humanist readily views as merely incidental or ornamental? Not that Bissoondath is oblivious to the fact that to ask an ethnic community to relinquish those (outward) practices or to perform them within “reason” (such as asking RCMP Sikhs not to wear turbans while reporting for

duty) for the sake of a collective image of national conformity may raise detrimental moral and existential stakes for the community in question. But the argument that, under the skin, we are all “colourless” human beings leaves his readers in the lurch, for to ask “what is Canadian” in this respect, as he does, is to beg the question at best and to become irrelevant at worst (67).<sup>29</sup>

Despite its truculent polemic,<sup>30</sup> Bissoondath’s book remains central in one’s understanding of official multiculturalism as a controversial liberal state policy as well as in spawning further theorizations of the complicity between multiculturalism and exoticism as on-going discursive and cultural practices in commodity market economy. Stanley Fish, for instance, re-thinks such complicity in terms of the seeming opposition between what he calls “boutique multiculturalism” and “strong multiculturalism.” Fish defines the former as follows:

- Boutique multiculturalism is the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high profile flirtations with the other in the manner satirized by Tom Wolfe under the rubric of “radical chic.” Boutique multiculturalism is characterized by its superficial or cosmetic relationship to the objects of its affection. Boutique Multiculturalists admire or appreciate or enjoy or sympathize with or (at the very least) “recognize the legitimacy of” the traditions of cultures other than their own; but boutique multiculturalists will always stop short of approving other cultures at a point where some value at their center generates an act that offends against the canons of civilized decency as they have been either declared or assured. (378)

Fish’s conceptualization of boutique multiculturalism clearly draws upon the principles of exoticism, that is, on an exoticism that revels in a shallow fascination with the

external markers of cultural difference but that remains firmly grounded in its ethnocentricity. Tzvetan Todorov defines ethnocentrism as “the unwarranted establishing of the specific values of one’s own society as universal values” (1). And it is because of this universalist claim that boutique multiculturalism emerges as simply an ethnocentrism camouflaged behind an ostensibly innocuous xenophilia. Some aspects of multiculturalism are founded upon Western assumptions about the universal elements that all humans share; and by the same token, the uncanny effect of the exotic, one can argue, is in part created when such assumptions are challenged in a slightly threatening way. A boutique multiculturalist is, therefore, an exoticist who enjoys other cultures only insofar as they do not interfere with what he or she perceives as fundamental or universal in “us” as human beings. For the boutique multiculturalist, there are certain unchangeable, almost inviolably sacrosanct universals that define us as “rational” human beings. And the Other’s cultural difference can be expressed, cherished, and celebrated only to the extent that it does not disturb one’s assurance in “one’s universal identity” (380). The boutique multiculturalist may find pleasure eating couscous in a local Tunisian or Moroccan restaurant or watching a TV program displaying exotic tent-dwelling, camel-riding Bedouins, but he or she may also be quick to dismiss lamb-slaughtering as barbaric and backward. Such a dismissal may become even more uncompromising when core ideals of Bedouin honour, modesty, veiling, and martyrdom are involved. For these often enter into conflict with Western principles of Reason, human dignity, individual freedom, and the sanctity of human life. The boutique multiculturalist is unable, and often reluctant, to acknowledge the fact that certain rituals and practices in other cultures are essential ontological, ethical, and even sacred determinants of collective and personal identity. In Muslim

orthopraxy, for instance, performing animal sacrifice, observing certain dietary laws, and abstaining from physical pleasures and uncharitable thoughts during the holy month of Ramadan are as important as the ultimate profession of faith itself. In sum, “a boutique multiculturalist does not and cannot take seriously the core values of the cultures he tolerates. The reason he cannot is that he does not see those values as truly ‘core’ but as overlays on a substratum of essential humanity” (379).

At the other end of the multicultural spectrum, Fish identifies “strong multiculturalism” as a deep and often exaggerated absorption into the culture of the Other:

Whereas the boutique multiculturalist will accord a superficial respect to cultures other than his own, a respect he will withdraw when he finds the practices of a culture irrational or inhumane, a strong multiculturalist will want to accord a *deep* respect to all cultures at their core, for he believes that each has the right to form its own identity and nourish its own sense of what is rational and humane. For the strong multiculturalist the first principle is not rationality or some other supracultural universal, but tolerance. (382; emphasis in original)

A strong multiculturalist is someone who “values difference in and for itself rather than as a manifestation of something more basically constitutive” (382). But the strong multiculturalist, Fish goes on to argue, is soon faced with an inevitable dilemma, especially when confronted with the seemingly perplexing intolerance of the Other’s culture that threatens to override his or her own: either one extends one’s tolerance to encompass the very intolerance of the Other’s culture, in which case the very concept of tolerance loses its validity; or one dismisses “the core intolerance of that culture [. . .] in the name of some supracultural universal,” in which case one comes to represent

“somewhat a deeper instance of the shallow category of boutique multiculturalism.”

As such, the strong multiculturalist is different from the boutique multiculturalist only in degree, not in kind (383). On the other hand, to allow unquestioningly the full actualization of one particular culture, such as accepting the death sentence on Salman Rushdie, simply and inevitably turns one into a “uniculturalist,” not a multiculturalist. Thus, Fish deduces, multiculturalism does not exist, for “no one could possibly *be* a multiculturalist in any interesting and coherent sense” (384; emphasis in original). In other words, a multiculturalist can be only a *tolerant*, not an *accepting* individual.

Bissoondath sketches out quite convincingly the conflation of the concepts of tolerance and acceptance in Canadian multicultural discourse:

For thirty years we have largely heeded the call of multiculturalism to practise tolerance, but tolerance has proved to be a thin shell. Despite the Department of Multiculturalism’s insistence that it has little to do with song and dance, its most enduring lesson has been: I will enjoy your curries, I will applaud your dances, I will admire your costumes, I will enjoy feeling tolerant (if slightly uncomfortable) at the sight of you and your kind in the street. But don’t expect me to truly accept you as one of us, especially not when the chips are down. I *tolerate* you, I don’t *know* you and I certainly don’t accept you. (197; emphases in original)

Multiculturalism is a demographic fact, Fish insists, and “saying yes or no to [it] seems to make about as much sense as saying yes or no to history, which will keep on rolling along irrespective of the judgement you pass on it” (Fish 385). According to Fish, Charles Taylor’s concept of “inspired adhocery” may be a viable method to reconcile, albeit relatively, the differences amongst ethno-cultural communities in a

multicultural society. It designates the need to abandon principled arguments and to “improvise” rules and principles that address in more concrete and immediate ways the problems at hand. While not subscribing entirely to this “inspired adhocery” principle, Fish intimates that since multiculturalism is now a demographic fact, it will run its own course irrespective of hair-splitting theorizations about its merits and demerits. What one needs to do instead, he proposes, is revise, readjust, or even create new rules and principles in accordance with the changes brought about by the progress of multiculturalism (387). In tune with his anti-foundationalist stance, Fish’s “adhocery” model may be commendable for its recognition of the complexity and the constantly changing reality of a multicultural society; nevertheless, and on the practical level, it amounts to little more than “a game of legislative catch-up,” as Bissoondath describes it (33)—an *ex post facto* improvisational model, at best, that emends rather than prevents the perceived social ills of multiculturalism. On the other hand, dismissing principled (i.e., liberal-oriented and thus self-referential) theorizations of multiculturalism as useless on the basis that multiculturalism is an urgent demographic fact and must be addressed as such is like dismissing the writing of autobiography as irrelevant on the basis that its subject is *in fact* still alive. Whether multiculturalism is a demographic fact or “an incoherent [philosophical] concept that cannot be meaningfully either affirmed or rejected,” as Fish concludes, one should not foreclose further attempts to theorize it, even if the ethico-political principles and motivations of those attempts are noticeably questionable. Any opportunity for debate, no matter how unjust its presuppositions are, has a certain merit to it, if only to lay bare the very unjustness, formal or otherwise, of the debate itself. By dismissing principled theorizations of multiculturalism in favour of an unprincipled improvisational strategy

(such as “inspired adhocery”), Fish unwittingly implicates himself in the same “strange openness” for which he takes to task liberal multicultural theorists like Amy Gutmann and Jurgen Habermas who, he thinks, “peremptorily” and unwisely banish from the multicultural forum claims, such as those made by Islamic fundamentalists or hate speakers, which only *they* (Gutmann and Habermas) perceive as fundamentally *irrational* (391).

Adopting a less compromising and a more historically grounded approach than Fish’s, antiracist feminist Marxist critic Himani Bannerji exposes state multiculturalism’s implication in prejudicial othering politics through what she describes as the “culturalization” of social and political demands made by Canada’s visible minorities. In *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender* (2000), Bannerji states, “It is the culturalization of antiracist and oppositional politics in the last decade or so that has largely made it possible for the government of the U.S. or of Canada to maintain the appearance of a democracy” (8). In Canada, for instance, the official discourse of multiculturalism reduces class and social struggle to a mere cultural struggle, thus “deflecting critical attention from a constantly racializing Canadian political economy” (9). Moreover, taking Charles Taylor to task for not including social and material relations of power in his theorization of liberal multiculturalism and for delving instead into “the metaphysics of the human condition” (128), Bannerji pinpoints the inherent contradiction in multiculturalism in that it abstracts the specific (i.e., difference) into universalist claims about truth and human nature (131). Taylor, according to Bannerji, fails to address this contradiction precisely because he understands “difference as only a cultural category, unscripted with relations of power [. . .]. He seems not to make any distinction

between different kinds of differences, those which could be called cultural diversities, and those structured through power relations and which could be encoded as gender, 'race,' and class"(131-32). Even the notion of recognition, so fundamental in Taylor's conceptualization of multicultural politics, indicates the need of one group to be recognized by another, thus "signal[ing] to relations of power and [tying] cultural recognition to power/knowledge" (136). Taylor's politics of recognition, Bannerji suggests, eventually de-historicizes, and thus de-politicizes, cultural difference by abstracting it into a "phenomenon of ontology and taste" and by positing a purportedly "core" Anglo-European tradition as a universal referent (132).

Like Bannerji, Eva Mackey critiques the Anglo-Euro-centrism in Canadian constructions of a "core" cultural and national identity. In *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (2002), Mackey calls into question both the legitimacy and the authority of what she calls Canada's "project of nation-building" and its underlying mythopoeia by highlighting its variableness and flexibility as well as by suggesting that its founding principles and informing concepts are entrenched in a universalist, self-referential, Eurocentric ideology (11; 90). More specifically, Mackey questions the myth of Canadian pluralism and multicultural tolerance upon which the construction of national identity is based. Such a myth gains greater significance and becomes the source of undoubted national pride particularly when the image of the friendly and gentle Mounties is invoked in stark contrast to that of the violent and less tolerant American Westerners (1; 25; 76). For both Bannerji and Mackey, official multiculturalism indicates the ways in which liberal-oriented governments manage, control, and eventually institutionalize cultural difference in the name of a collective, homogeneous nation-building project (Mackey 152; Bannerji 91-

92). Government officials, as well as those who see themselves as the “true” Canadians, especially in rural, small-town communities in Southern Ontario, invoke such liberal notions as equality, rationality, and individual freedom in order to dispute the seemingly disconcerting formula of “*special* privileges and *special* rights for *special* groups” (105; emphasis in original). The demands for political rights by ethnic minorities, particularly during the early 1990s, created what Mackey describes as a “white backlash” where Anglophone white Canadians, threatened by the increase in such demands, expressed their discontent in the name of a supposedly homogeneous, Anglophone white Canada (3; 142; 153). Through a discourse of universalization, rationalization, and normativization, disseminated and popularized mainly by liberal-oriented governments, “*Canadian-Canadians*” come to believe that the privileges granted to multicultures may undermine Canada’s “core culture,” a culture they generally imagine as bilingual, Anglophone and Francophone, and white (105; emphasis in original). This paradox of cultural diversity as an undeniably entrenched characteristic of Canadian society on the one hand and the requirement of a mythopoeic, national narrative about a unifying core culture on the other usually reduces multicultures to embellishing additions to the ostensibly “bounded and identifiable core culture of the nation” (151).

It is at this juncture of paradoxical exigencies that multiculturalism and exoticism strike a discursive alliance. Within these two alterity discourses, ethnic diversity is paradoxically constructed as essential to the nation’s celebration of its cultural mosaic, but also disposable precisely when the perceived unity of the nation, when the “Canada first” ideal, is threatened by the political mobilization of that diversity (Mackey 147-53). Under the umbrella of liberal democracy, freedom of

expression, cultural diversity, and the right to difference, ethno-cultural minorities are usually construed as ornamental exotica adorning the Canadian multicultural “mosaic.” Emphasizing the prettifying exoticness of ethno-cultural difference and allowing that difference to be expressed through quaint rituals and state-sponsored local events and programs may give ethnic minorities a sense of freedom and fulfillment, but it does not usually guarantee their full participation in the more vital domains pertaining to political representation, employment equity, citizenship rights, and government decision-making policies.

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Symbol of ethno-cultural tolerance though it is proclaimed to be, North American multiculturalism is now perceived with more suspicion than ever before, particularly after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. If anything, the World Trade Centre attack triggered an ever-growing public anxiety about national security, leading to a number of immigration policy reforms and other legislative measures targeting the admission and integration of ethnic minorities, especially those of Arab origin (Kruger, Mulder, and Korenic 77-81). The widespread assumption that national security can be achieved by re-adjusting immigration and border policies implicitly stigmatizes incoming Arab immigrants as potential “social problem[s]” (Fleras and Elliott 240). As Raja Khouri, president of the Canadian Arab Federation, puts it, “Arab Canadians are today convinced that there is a bigger threat to our way of life from the security agenda than there is from terrorism itself” (qtd. in Arat-Koc 222). Partly because of the far from complimentary media portrayals of Arabs, Arab immigrants in Canada tend to figure less as embellishment than blemish in the country’s multicultural mosaic. And with

growing concerns about national security, the multicultural principle of recognizing cultural difference has given way to “racial profiling [which] has not only become de facto policy, but also gained significant popular legitimacy” (Arat-Koc 220). This is not to mention the frequent and factitious conflation of Arabs and Muslims that exacerbates what Arat-Koc describes as a “‘clash of civilizations’ discourse,” a discourse that “posits every Arab and Muslim as guilty by association, thereby increasing Arabs’ and Muslims’ sense of exclusion from mainstream notions of what/who constitutes ‘Canada’” (223). The currency that post-9/11 discourse of civilizational struggle has acquired seems to identify Canada more patently with the West, something which, as Arat-Koc suggests, “implic[s] a rewhitening of Canadian identity after decades of multiculturalism” (229).

The representations of Arabs in the much-celebrated discourse of multiculturalism, despite claims to the contrary, has been couched in a discursive framework informed by binaristic ideologies of Self versus Other, White versus Black, West versus East, and so on. With the World Trade Center attack freshly engraved in the collective conscious of the global community, it seems as if the long-established truisms about Arabs have now acquired a renewed aura of legitimacy. Today’s media reporting on Middle East crises and on Arab affairs in general often suggest dramatized spectacles of terror brought home, while the multiculturalism principle of recognizing ethnic difference gradually turns into a journalistic obsession with a criminalizing rhetoric of surveillance and scrutiny. The obvious effect of such rhetoric is twofold: while it makes Arab-Canadians lose faith in the political process and thus gradually seclude themselves from it, it confines them to what Khouri describes as a “psychological internment” (qtd. in Arat-Koc 237). Monochromatic and obsessive

coverage of an ethnic minority's social problems leads to a debilitating "psychic apartheid" (Bissoondath 152) in which the members of that minority are systematically reduced to a social nuisance.

Reading Ann-Marie MacDonald's work, one begins to notice how she repeatedly calls into question the ideological and discursive framework within which Canadian multiculturalism defines its ethnic minorities. MacDonald often draws on her Arabic-Lebanese background as well as on Orientalist literature in such a way as to evoke anxieties about the all too facile idealization of multiculturalism, prejudicial othering processes, and the limits of representing cultural difference altogether. In MacDonald's *The Arab's Mouth* (1995), a play set in late-nineteenth-century Scotland, Arab culture is limited to passing textual allusions (Stevenson 41);<sup>31</sup> in *Fall on Your Knees* (*Fall*), MacDonald foregrounds that culture as a constitutive element of the book's thematic structure. Soon after the premiering of *The Arab's Mouth* by Factory Theatre, Toronto, in 1990, and before its re-working into the play *Belle Moral: A Natural History* (2005) about fourteen years later, MacDonald was "distracted" by *Fall on Your Knees*, which was originally meant for the stage but somehow developed into a bulky novel of about seven-hundred odd pages. In the Afterword to *Belle Moral*, MacDonald explains how her first novel and international bestseller came into being:

After *The Arab's Mouth* premiered, I knew that it was not quite finished and, in keeping with my experience as a playwright and collaborator, I fully expected to return to it. I got distracted, however, by another project which I thought would be a play but turned out to be a novel. *Fall on Your Knees* developed many of the themes and images that I had touched on in *The Arab's Mouth*, and

I came to see the play as a progenitor—or, to change metaphors, as a kind of sketch book for the novel. (153-54)

While the play shows how gender relations are informed by fin-de-siècle eugenicist discourse and other theories about biological determinism, MacDonald's novel relocates the play's setting and expands its thematic scope by exploring a variety of other issues related to race, gender, sexuality, and cultural identity, and these within the context of Canada's immigrant culture as it gradually shaped itself during the first half of the twentieth century. In the multicultural settler society that the novel foregrounds, eugenicist discourse (or "cultural genetics," to use Bannerji's phrase) becomes inevitably enmeshed in a more complex historical and discursive network that involves new forms of racism, imperialism, diaspora, ethnicity, gender, immigration, and citizenship. Written during the early 1990s, a period when the purported Canadian crisis of identity was exacerbated by the introduction of multiculturalism as an official state policy, *Fall on Your Knees* focuses on Canadian interethnic relations and how such relations often come to be determined by a Eurocentric discourse in which racial diversity is either celebrated as an exotic adornment in the nation's cultural mosaic or dismissed as a social problem threatening to disrupt the mythopoeia of a cohesive national narrative.<sup>32</sup>

MacDonald's debut novel, *Fall on Your Knees* tells a multi-generational family saga in which Arabs and Arab-Canadians rub shoulders with a host of other ethnic minorities (Jews, Africans, Afro-Americans, Scotch, and Irish). Set mainly in early twentieth-century Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, and partly in New York City during the Jazz era of the early 1920s, the novel opens with an interracial love story between two first-generation immigrants: the Scottish-Irish James Piper, a striving

young piano tuner, and the exotic-looking, thirteen-year-old Lebanese, Materia Mahmoud. Although disowned by her father for eloping with an *inklese* (pejorative Arabic for Englishman), Materia marries James and before long gives birth to three daughters: Kathleen, on whom James lavishes his fatherly but incestuous tenderness as she grows into a promising opera diva; Mercedes, a religious and caring mother figure; and Frances, a mischievous but intelligent girl-guide who becomes a bar stripper. Upon her sudden return from New York City, where she has been pursuing her singing career all the while flirting with a black female piano player, Kathleen dies giving birth to Lily, whose true father is revealed later in the novel to be none other than James himself. At this point, and particularly after Kathleen's and Materia's deaths, the narrative sinks into a bleak and phantasmagoric drama where homosexuality, incest, and crime constitute the family secrets with which the Piper sisters have to grapple before they reach self-knowledge and acceptance.

*Fall on Your Knees* thematizes the correlation between exoticism and gender and racial relations, on the one hand, and the cultural and existential implications of this correlation to Canada's hyphenated immigrant communities, on the other hand. James Piper's relationship with the Mahmouds, for instance, is redolent of an exoticist's capacity to consume and condemn at one and the same time the object of his or her curiosity. Like that of a Boutique Multiculturalist, James's exoticist fascination with the non-white Other is nothing but a "superficial or cosmetic relationship to the objects of [. . .] affection" (Fish 378), a mere overlay on deep-seated ethnocentrism. In fact, his first and fateful encounter with the Mahmouds is characterized by mixed feelings of attraction and apprehension, desire and distrust. For instance, when Mrs. Mahmoud offers James her home-cooked Lebanese food, "he was afraid she'd feed

him something *exotic and horrible*” (MacDonald 12; emphasis added). But when she reads “the tea leaves at the bottom of [his] cup” and predicts prosperity and happiness for his future household, he feels “neither frightened nor skeptical”; rather, he feels “drawn in with involuntary faith” by the strange power of her ancient psychometrics (12). Moreover, no sooner does he meet her daughter and his would-be wife, the twelve-going-on-thirteen Materia, in their Ottoman-style home than he imagines himself “an Aladdin in an orchard dripping diamonds,” spellbound by the “sweet and strange” smell of her hair and surrendering to the “evil enchantment slid[ing] from him” (14-15). And as she speaks, he simply yields to the exotic accent of her Arabified English: “She had an accent that she never did outgrow. A softening of consonants, a slightly liquid ‘r,’ a tendency to clip not with the lips but with the throat itself. What she did for the English language was pure music” (14). Be all that as it may, as soon as James knows that Materia has been betrothed to a Lebanese dentist since she was four, he is quick to condemn the “Old Country” (Lebanon) and its “barbaric,” “backward,” and “savage” customs and even calls her kinfolk “Oily bastards” when they chastise him for tarnishing their honour by eloping with their daughter (16). Later in the narrative, James reiterates his condemnation of what he perceives as barbaric Arab customs when he advises Kathleen to keep away from her Mahmoud cousins at Holy Angels: “Your mother and I were very young. We eloped. It was wrong, but what was worse was the behavior of the Mahmouds. Barbaric. They are from a part of the world that hasn’t seen a moment’s peace in hundreds of years, little wonder” (117). Either enchanted by her childish charm or repulsed by the idea of losing her to this unknown suitor/rival (or both) from such “barbaric” quarters, James does whatever it takes to secure Materia for himself.

James's marriage to Materia Mahmoud soon triggers a number of issues concerning gender and race relations. While the interracial couple's initial attraction may be attributed to the fatefully irresistible exoticness they happen to perceive in one another, the harsh reality of their marital life reveals James's dormant fears of blood mixing. Once his desire for Materia is satiated, James's racial prejudices against his Arab in-laws come to the fore (Stevenson 44). And when his favourite daughter Kathleen, named "after his late mother," is born, with her "[s]ilky red-gold hair, green eyes and white white skin" (MacDonald 37; 41), his prejudices become even more pronounced, so much so that he starts doubting the biological adequacy of his own wife, who is after all too young to breastfeed her first daughter, and he even goes as far as to accuse her of having lured him into a regrettable marriage.

How had he been ensnared by a child? There was something not right about Materia. Normal children didn't run away with men. He knew from his reading that clinical simpletons necessarily had an overdeveloped animal nature. She had seduced him. That was why he hadn't noticed she was a child. Because she wasn't one. Not a real one. It was queer. Sick, even. Perhaps it was a racial flaw. He would read up on it. (41)

One can only pause and wonder: what kind of literature is James reading! We know that the book crates, which he never ceases ordering, include mainly works by both Freud and Darwin—something which explains his obvious identification with turn-of-the-century eugenicist discourse according to which the purported intellectual imbecility and moral "deviance" of the non-white race is attributed either to biopsychological queerness or to inherited deficiency in the genes.<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting here that what seduced James first was Materia's skin colour, her "[s]ummer skin the

colour of sand stroked by the tide” (14). But after seven years of not-so-felicitous marital life, “one of those things that [is] always before his eyes” is not the extra few pounds that Materia has now gained, but rather the very darkness of her skin to which he was first drawn and by which he is now repulsed (45). Perplexed by Kathleen’s sexual perversity (her lesbian attraction to Rose, the Black piano player) and by his inability to determine its source, James presumes that she has inherited it from her mother:

James is grateful that all his girls turned out so fair. But there’s obviously a morbid tendency in the blood they inherited from Materia that made Kathleen lean towards colour. James has taken delivery of another crate of books. He has dipped into Dr Freud in an effort to discover where to lay the blame for Kathleen’s perversity. Freud calls women “the dark continent.” James couldn’t agree more. He doesn’t hate blacks, he just doesn’t want them near his bloodline. (448-49)

James’s anxieties stem from a disconcerting realization that even the white race, the perfect example of which would be his “peaches and cream” daughter (117), may have within it a “capacity for evil” (DeLamotte 26). Disavowing his own perverse and irrepressible interracial desire for the exotic-looking, dark-skinned, underage Materia, James imputes Kathleen’s attraction to a Black lover to matrilineal biological determinants: it is a contaminated gene passed down to her by her Arab mother, for James himself, the white Scottish-Irish male, is neither an “enkelese bastard,” as the Mahmouds like to call him, nor one of those “[f]ilthy black Syrians,” as he mistakenly calls them (MacDonald 421; 23). Moreover, James’s conflation of race and gender is nowhere more obvious than it is in the above passage. For not only does he take

Freud's phrase "dark continent" literally, associating darkness/blackness and women with threatening inscrutability, but he also subsumes virtually all dark races under the same category, including his in-laws who, interestingly enough, are neither white nor black. And the deeper James delves into his readings of history, psychology, and biology, the more threatening *Materia* becomes in his eyes. For, now more than ever, she epitomizes the mysteriously dark and dangerous female other, the "dark continent," from which he and his fair daughters should keep away.

James's Lebanese in-laws represent an ethnic minority whose racial identity often challenges what would become the official classificatory principle of Canadian multiculturalism where cultural difference is usually determined by such external markers as skin colour, language, race, and customs. In terms of racial classification, the Mahmouds are neither black nor white; they are somewhere in between, in the space of the "No Colour Land," as it were; they are white, but not quite;<sup>34</sup> they represent an immigrant minority whose skin colour allows it to straddle two cultures (black and white) without ever being completely immersed in either:

[T]he Mahmouds aren't really white, are they? They're something else. They are somewhat coloured. What this means in Nova Scotia at this time is that, for the Mahmouds, the colour bar that guards access to most aspects of society tends to be negotiable. It helps that they have money. (145)

The racial unclassifiability of the Mahmouds instils in them what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as the "new *mestiza* consciousness," a sort of trickster consciousness by virtue of which they are able to "juggle [many] cultures" yet remain absorbed by none (233; 235). Ironically, the Mahmouds' racial/colour difference prevents neither James Piper nor Mr. Mahmoud from doing business with each other. Colour barriers, as

Stevenson remarks, can be ignored if there is profitable business in the equation (43), be it with “Oily bastards” or with an “Anglo dog son-of-an-*enklese*-bitch with no respect for people’s daughters” (MacDonald, *Fall* 19; 205). Later, in the novel’s penultimate section entitled *Hejira*,<sup>35</sup> Kathleen relates in her diary how she finds herself at pains explaining her mixed racial make-up to Rose when the latter calls her “Ayrab,” a working-class, lowbrow phonetic distortion of “Arab”:

I waited for Rose to spot the framed photograph of Daddy and Mumma on my dresser. She said, “Who’s that?” I said, “That’s my father.” She said, “Who’s that with him?” And I said, “That’s my mother.” And she just stared at the picture, then looked back at me and said, “Not your natural mother.”

“What do you mean?”

“Not your blood kin.”

“Yes.”

Then she looked back at the picture. “I can’t see it.”

“No one can.”

“What is she?”

“Canadian.”

Rose blushed. Hurray! But I put her out of her misery; “She’s Lebanese.”

“She’s an Ayrab?”

“*They* don’t like to be called Arabs. Especially not ‘Ayrabs.’”

“What’s wrong with that, that’s how I’ve always said it.”

“Well. Anyhow, a lot of Lebanese come from the coast and they’re more Mediterranean, more European, you know. Not like Arabs.”

“She musta come from inland.” Then she looked at me and said, “Coulda fooled me.”

I said, “I’m not trying to ‘fool’ anyone.”

“You look pure white.”

“I am pure white. My mother is white.”

“Not quite.”

“Well, she’s not coloured.”

She smiled–sneered is more like it–and said, “Don’t worry honey, you plenty white for the both of you.” (623-24; emphasis added)

By disavowing her Arab background (“*They* don’t like to be called Arabs”) and claiming a “more Mediterranean” (i.e., white European) one instead, Kathleen engages in what Michael W. Suleiman describes as “ethnic denial.” To avoid racial stereotyping, Arab immigrants sometimes “de-emphasize their Arab or Islamic background by claiming a connection with what they believe is a more acceptable appearance [. . .]. Instead of proclaiming their Arabism, for instance, they claim to be Greek or Italian” (Suleiman 15). Some even go as far as to employ the same Western stereotypes about Arabs, as Mr. Mahmoud does when he regretfully realizes that “he had given his most beautiful daughter [Camille] to a dirty half-civilized Arab [Jameel]” simply because the latter “speaks the same beautiful language.” Blaming himself for marrying his daughter to an abusive, wolf-in-sheepskin husband, Mr. Mahmoud insists that “[t]he Jameels are Arabs. We the Mahmouds are more Mediterranean. Closer to being European, really” (MacDonald, *Fall* 407).

Worth noting here is that the ethnic identity of the early Arab immigrants to North America between the 1880s and World War I was the cause of much confusion

and contention in the host countries.<sup>36</sup> The early Syrian immigrants, for instance, were subjected to the same racial restrictions imposed on Asians whose “undesirable” entry into Canada was made virtually impossible by the exorbitant \$ 200-per-capita tax requirement (Abu Laban, *Olive Branch* 85).<sup>37</sup> The Syrians’ reaction to the Canadian government’s racialized immigration policies constituted a threefold claim: first, Syrians were White/Caucasian; second, the immigration policy targeted the Hindus, not Syrians; third, and in keeping with “the 1920 San Remo conference [. . .], Syrians should be classified as of European rather than of Asiatic origin, because Syria (i.e. the Greater Syria region, including modern Syria and Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan) was under British and French protection” (85-86). Moreover, not only were the Syrians and Lebanese mistakenly viewed as Turkish subjects, but their isolation grew even worse particularly when Turkey entered World War I as Canada’s enemy (Sawaie xiv; Abu Laban, *Olive Branch* 87). After World War II, however, and especially after the 1953 Immigration Act and its subsequent amendment in 1967, Canada’s immigration policies became relatively more tolerant and generated a second wave of Arab immigrants from countries other than Syria and Lebanon. With Canada becoming more conscious of its multicultural make-up, particularly during the 1960s and the 1970s, the racial status of Arabs was less problematic, especially that of Middle Easterners who “came to be classed with Europeans rather than Asians and were subject to more liberal rules of sponsorship by relatives who were Canadian residents” (Hayani 285). In general, Canada’s purported ethnic diversity began to be viewed as an asset that had to be celebrated and preserved by all Canadians—at least theoretically.<sup>38</sup>

If the early Arab immigrants to North America were mainly peddlers trading in exotica and curios (Sawaie xiii), today’s Arab-Americans and Arab-Canadians survive

negative stereotyping by negotiating their “white but not quite” racial status, either associating it with a European/Mediterranean and thus less stigmatizing kinship (Suleiman 15) or marketing it as an exotic commodity in a metropolitan cultural economy.<sup>39</sup> In *Fall on Your Knees*, for instance, Kathleen is aware of what others perceive as the exotic aura of her polygenic background (Celtic-Arab-Canadian), and she capitalizes on it, rather than hide it, in a bid to attain worldwide celebrity as an opera diva:

Kathleen intends to be the Eleonora Duse of the operatic stage. [. . .] Her Celtic-Arab blood and her origins on a scraggy island off the east coast of a country popularly supposed to consist of a polar ice-cap are enough, by American standards, both to cloak her in a sufficient diva mystery and to temper the exotic with a dash of windswept North American charm. She'll refer to pickled moose meat and kippered cod tongues and occasionally swear in Arabic just to get the legend rolling, but she is the New World, the golden West. She is no Sicilian or Castilian castaway bound for glory, then early ruin. Like them she is going to be great but, unlike them, she is going to survive. (151)

Corey Frost reads the above passage as an instance of “Kathleen’s awareness of the performed nature of identity,” emphasizing that the up-and-coming diva’s multilingualism (English, French, Italian, Arabic, and Latin) makes her “capable of adopting or emphasizing any cultural elements that suit the purposes of her career and of discarding those that do not” (204). I suggest that Kathleen is strategically transforming stigma into enigma; that is, transforming her ethnic hybridity (impurity) into profitable, exoticist self-fashioning. Safeguarded by the invisibility of her white skin, Kathleen projects professional success by deploying a strategy of self-promotion

that bestows upon her mixed ethnicity the aura of the exotic. To the curious male spectator/consumer in the U.S., Kathleen's exoticness consists less in the colour of her skin than in the seemingly unusual assortment of Oriental charm (Lebanon), Celtic mythicism (Ireland), and polar provenance (the Canadian North).

Turning ethnic liability into marketable value,<sup>40</sup> Kathleen promotes herself as a marginal (i.e., exotic) commodity, thus catering to incipient North American boutique multiculturalism and engaging in what Edward Said describes more generally as the modern Orient's self-Orientalization: "the modern Orient [. . .] participates in its own Orientalizing" (*Orientalism* 325). That Euro-American educated Arab intellectuals in particular, Said argues, come to see themselves through the same subliminal lenses as those of Western Orientalism is disquieting evidence "that its [Orientalism's] influence has spread to 'the Orient' itself," producing "second-order analyses by Arabs of 'the Arab mind,' 'Islam,' and other myths" (322). Such self-Orientalizing, according to Said, is in part due to the pervasiveness of what he calls "the fact of consumerism in the Orient":

There is a vast standardization of taste in the region, symbolized not only by transistors, blue jeans, and Coca-Cola but also by cultural images of the Orient supplied by American mass media and consumed unthinkingly by the mass television audience. The paradox of an Arab regarding himself as an "Arab" of the sort put out by Hollywood is but the simplest result of what I am referring to. Another result is that the Western market economy and its consumer orientation have produced (and are producing at an accelerating rate) a class of educated people whose intellectual formation is directed to satisfying market needs. (324-25)

In *Fall on Your Knees*, Kathleen's self-exoticizing fantasies about her career as a professional ethnic in the entertainment business stem largely from her (and her sisters') exposure to and internalization of mass culture iconographies in which the Orient is coded, spectacularized, and ultimately consumed as mysteriously exotic otherness. For instance, Mercedes, her friend and confidante Helen Frye, and her sister Frances, go to the pictures many times simply to re-watch Douglas Fairbanks, the silent screen sensation of the 1920s, in *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924). Moreover, while Kathleen fancies herself a larger-than-life, exotic opera celebrity, her sister Mercedes fantasizes about Ralph Luvovitz, her Jewish neighbour and secret crush, in the role of *The Sheik's* impossibly good-looking Rudolph Valentino wearing a turban, lounging his time away "in his lavish striped tent, or galloping across the sands on a white Arabian charger" (241). Although Kathleen and Mercedes appear to be trapped in an automatization of those stereotypes usually structured by the media around the Orient at large,<sup>41</sup> their self-Orientalizing is also ironic, for they identify not with "authentic" Orientals or Arabs but with their cinematic counterfeits.<sup>42</sup>

Cinema in MacDonald's text functions as a cultural repository for hackneyed Orientalist images about Arabs. References to early-twentieth-century Orientalist films such as *The Sheik* (1921), *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), and *Harem Scarem* (1932)—all drawing to varying degrees on Richard F. Burton's translation of *A Thousand and One Nights (Alf Leila wa Leila)*—gesture toward the male-oriented commodity culture underlying North American multiculturalism.<sup>43</sup> The on-screen caption of *The Sheik*, for instance, reads "Douglas Fairbanks in 'The Thief of Baghdad', An Arabian Nights Fantasy," followed by an excerpt from the opening paragraph of Burton's introduction to his notoriously erotic sixteen-volume translation of the Oriental saga (1884-87).

Although Burton's translation was bowdlerized supposedly in keeping with Victorian ideals of decorum and modesty, its undying appeal and massive circulation and adaptation continue to hinge upon "the fiction of the erotic East" it provides its Western readership (Kabbani 7).<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, by conjuring its nineteenth-century textual genealogy (Burton's work, rather than Edith M. Hull's less authoritative novel, its more immediate source),<sup>45</sup> the movie not only compensates literally for its acoustic silence, but it also signifies and authenticates the historical and documentary truth of the exotic spectacle it promises to offer. As Shohat and Stam suggest, the signifying and mutually authenticating relationship between the spectatorial and the scriptural legitimizes "Hollywood's role as archivist and historian," thus attributing "a grand historical and artistic aura to a medium still associated with circus-like entertainment" (145).

MacDonald's postexotic engagement with filmic Orientalism consists in exposing its flamboyant, consumer-oriented theatricality and interrogating the white homophobic masculinity that underwrites it. It is in New York City, symbol of North American cosmopolitan multiculturalism, that MacDonald makes a mockery of the phallo-centric Orientalism of the early Hollywood film industry. Kathleen and Rose, her Black lover, go to "a place that was half theatre, half bar, called Club Mecca [. . .] up in Harlem on Seventh Avenue" (590) in order to listen to the "Cleopatra of Jazz" Jesse Hogan (645). With Rose donning her father's "lovely suit" (644) and passing as Kathleen's male partner, the clandestine couple enter the club and, before they begin their alcohol-induced public flirtation, witness what turns out to be a hodgepodge staging of a scene from Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheik*. The curtain is "sparkly purple [. . .] with 'MECCA' written *à la* Araby in gold sequins against a silhouette of

minarets” (642), and it parts not on “Ali Baba’s Forty Follies,” as teasingly announced by the impresario, but on a glitzy Orientalist extravaganza, a racy pell-mell display of scantily-clad belly dancers, exotic harem maidens, ruthlessly lewd sultans, and spellbinding “snake music”:

The curtain parts on a harem. Light-skinned girls and a very fat dark sultan lounge on striped pillows. The girls dance the seven veils while he sings a song of illicit lust for one of them—the lightest one—and the band plays snake music. The tent flaps part and handsome Prince Ahmed [Valentino] pokes his turbaned head through and kisses the heroine. Then bingo, you’re in Gay Paree doing the cancan, and then the same young lovers flee the evil sultan all through the world’s capitals while the chorus girls quick-change and outdance Ziegfeld’s. We went to Hawaii, Japan, Holland and Canada, where they pretended to be Eskimos and mounties! And although the girls changed costumes and countries every five seconds, they never wore more than half a dozen square inches, even when they were fur-clad in Canada’s frozen wastes. (643)

The oriental harem metamorphoses from a traditionally enclosed, private space (a space the unveiling of which is symbolized by the parting of the curtains and “the tent flaps” as well as by the undressing of its surrogate inmates) to an open window onto far-off exotic geographies (Paris, Hawaii, Japan, and Canada) where the voyeuristic pleasure of a metropolitan audience is given ultimate license. Participating in the booming, Orient-inspired musicals, operas, and concert dances of the 1910s and the 1920s in the United States, the show also replicates what will soon become one of the most pervasive Orientalist *topoi* in the Hollywood film industry throughout the century: the

handsome European hero attired in Arab accoutrements and triumphantly rescuing a white European maiden who is about to be raped by the dark-skinned lewd Arab(s).<sup>46</sup>

While the rape and rescue motif in early (and contemporary) Hollywood films reinforces the stereotype of the gold-and-blonde-obsessed Arab, it also mirrors, as Shohat and Stam suggest, anxieties about racial impurity “within the sexual politics of colonialist discourse” (157). Within this discourse, and within Orientalist filmic representations by extension, “the denial of erotic intercourse between Europeans and non-Europeans”—thanks to the *deus ex machina* intervention of the European hero, of course—is justified by the putative normal sexuality of the former and the abnormal hyper-sexuality of the latter.

Images of Black/Arab women in “heat” versus “frigid” White women mythically elide the history of subordination of Third World Women by First World men. The hot/frigid dichotomy implies three interdependent axioms within the sexual politics of colonialist discourse: first, the sexual interaction of Black/Arab men and White women can *only* involve rape (since White women cannot possibly desire Black or Arab men); second, the sexual interaction of White men and Black or Arab women *cannot* involve rape (since Black or Arab women are in perpetual heat and desire the White master); and third, the interaction of Black or Arab men and Black/Arab women *also* cannot involve rape, since both are in perpetual heat. (157; emphases in original)

“Exoticist films,” Shohat and Stam proceed, “also authorize subliminally transsexual tropes, as the orient provides an outlet for a carnivalesque play with national and gender identity.” Rudolph Valentino in *The Sheik*, Douglas Fairbanks in *The Thief of Baghdad*, Elvis Presley in *Harum Scarum* (1965),<sup>47</sup> Peter O’Toole in *Lawrence of*

*Arabia* (1962), and Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman in *Ishtar* (1987), to enumerate but a few, are all made to masquerade in Arab dress, and such masquerading “manifests a latent desire to transcend fixed national and gender identity” (167). MacDonald parodies the exoticist filmic fantasy of cross-dressing and transgender role playing by extending it to the audience itself, where its female spectators (Kathleen and Rose) engage in a subversively phallicized mimicry of it by costuming themselves as a heterosexual couple (MacDonald, *Fall* 644). Just as it was “unthinkable for producers to show a white Western woman loving a dusky-skinned, swarthy Arab”—and if this happens to be the case, the male protagonist must be revealed later to be a European in Arab disguise (Shaheen 423)—Kathleen and Rose cannot possibly be seen together as a lesbian couple, let alone an interethnic one.<sup>48</sup> In the same way that interracial heterosexual license onstage may be evoked but must ultimately be revoked, interracial lesbian desire offstage can be enacted only through cross-dressing and social role playing, and this even in an ostensibly multicultural setting such as Club Mecca where a litany of “exotic” ethnicities (African-Americans, Chinese, West-Indians, Canadians, Irish, and Jews) come together to consume, ironically enough, their own exoticness (MacDonald, *Fall* 641-42). In this sense, if the Orientalist sexual utopia suggested by the Club Mecca spectacle must remain simply that—a spectacularized utopia to be enjoyed only from a voyeuristic distance—transgressive racial and gender relations (interracial lesbianism, in this case) are fulfilled but remain confined to the “Dark Continent” of the forbidden, the deviant, and the illicit.

Orientalist films develop scenarios where threatening fantasies of interracial encounters are suspended as soon as they are evoked. If fantasy is by definition premised on the necessary un-fulfillment of its fiction, then an Orientalist fantasy

hinges first and foremost upon the continuing projection of a colonial (and sexual) utopia. However, and in the context of the novel, while the harem scene onstage merely carnivalizes a White European male fantasy, a fantasy the recycling of which remains unthreatening principally because of its scopophilic/spectatorial distance, a more unsettling scene offstage takes place, where the destructive female sexuality suggested earlier by Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils is transposed onto an equally transgressive interracial Sapphism performed by the audience (Kathleen and Rose) and described by the author in almost pornographic detail (646-48).<sup>49</sup> After the "[i]rredeemably puerile" Club Mecca show and after Jesse Hogan's "[c]rude but compelling" performance (644; 646), Kathleen and her cross-dressed female partner, Rose, sneak out into a dim-lit alley and dance their own crude and tidally orgasmic dance. Kathleen recounts:

We slipped into an alley and I pulled her shirt out from her pants. I pressed my centre into her and she sighed. It made me flood from inside, the sweetest music. We were finally dancing. I slid my hands under and up her smooth sides, I wanted to be slow to savour but we couldn't, she gripped me and moved under me. I felt her nipples under my palms and I think I died. Rose gasped as though I'd stabbed her and I felt like a savage robbing a sacred tree, her thigh between my legs. I found her hand and led it to a place I know, I kissed it with the mouth that I keep hidden, then took her inside and sucked her like the greedy tide that can't decide to swallow or disgorge. I lost track of everything. And even after I finally could stop, I knew that I would never be finished. (647)

Phallicized interracial lesbian desire symbolically dismantles the androcentric fetishism of the earlier Orientalist scene, a scene into which lesbians could not otherwise have

been admitted because of their purported sexual deviance. I draw here on McClintock's socio-historical reading of female fetishism as a radical challenge to "the magisterial centrality of the phallus and the castration scene." Responding to the overarching phallogentrism of "the Freudian and Lacanian scene of fetishism," McClintock contends that "female fetishism dislodges the centrality of the phallus and parades the presence and legitimacy of a multiplicity of pleasures, needs and contradictions that cannot be reduced to the "desire to preserve the phallus" (183). Like Freud, McClintock suggests, "Lacan seems unable to entertain the idea that a lesbian might choose other women to celebrate and expand her sexuality, for to admit such a possibility would be to endorse the refusal of heterosexuality as the only viable social option and to subvert the fiction of one phallus as governing all desire" (195). The love-making scene between Kathleen and the symbolically phallicized Rose (cross-dressed as male) must be read neither as an Oedipal "compensation for the maternal phallus" nor as a disguised display of "disappointed heterosexuals" (McClintock 191; 194); rather, it must be read both as a mimicry (in the Bhabhian sense) of the Orientalist phallicism of the previous scene (the Club Mecca show) and as the socio-sexual enactment of the ambivalence of identity itself and the artificial nature of difference.

Dramatizing "the social legibility of dress" (McClintock 174),<sup>50</sup> MacDonald reveals the inventedness of identity by dis-arranging the dress codes by which it is conventionally and arbitrarily defined and categorized. In a period (the 1920s) when "women's newfound possibilities for sexual and social freedom were much discussed and derided" (Studlar 106), MacDonald creates and enacts a feminist counter-utopia where female cross-dressing and transgender role playing actively parodies the male-

centered Orientalist culture of the time, all the while suggesting that gender, race, nationality, and sexual identity are performative social constructs that can be transcended as easily as a mere change of costume. MacDonald uses popular Hollywood film tropes of Orientalist erotics (harems, exotic belly dancers, lewd Sultans, etc.), first, to parody the collusion between multiculturalism and exoticist consumerism in North American popular culture; and second, to broaden the scope of her readership by allowing, and thus legitimizing, an interracial lesbian sexuality to be the very instrument of that parody.

Kathleen's experience as a closeted lesbian expatriate in New York City during the 1920s reveals multiculturalism to be sometimes an onerous social reality,<sup>51</sup> not the least because of the male-centered exoticism that underlies it. Being ethnic (i.e., Canadian by American cultural standards) allows Kathleen to play up her exoticness, but it also prevents her "from being ordinary" (Bissoondath 106), that is, from living out her sexual identity fully and freely. One of Kathleen's New York diary entries reads as follows: "This is not a city [Harlem]. This is a world with whole countries in it. [. . .] It's a whole amazing world. You can walk for an hour and never hear a word of English, you can eat in five different countries in five blocks, you can hear music everywhere" (579). Kathleen describes a world of boutique multiculturalism that fosters an enjoyable cacophony of multiple ethnicities but that remains hardly adequate to accommodate transgressive interracial and gender relations. Despite its urban and multicultural energy and its resemblance to her hometown in Canada, Harlem is still a place where Kathleen feels "weird for being white," conspicuously exotic and out of place (581):

It reminded me of New Waterford, except Harlem is really prosperous. Not to mention that here I'm the odd one out. Everyone stared at me as I slunk by till I felt like something out of P.T. Barnum, "See the white slave princess, raised by wolves in darkest Canada!" A couple of young fellas sang a little song at me as I passed—softly, not nasty or anything, but it made me blush anyhow, calling me "sugar" and "baby," oh what I'd give to be *invisible*. Or to be taken as a man.

(626; emphasis added)

Kathleen's experience makes for an interesting case of reverse exoticism where whiteness is no longer a space made "unmarked and unnamed" (thus invisible) by virtue of its ubiquitousness (Dyer 1), but rather a glaringly conspicuous target of a non-white exoticist gaze.<sup>52</sup> Kathleen feels displaced and alienated not simply because she is perceived as an "exotic" Canadian in a predominantly Afro-American community, but also because she is a White lesbian with a penchant for Blacks.<sup>53</sup> And if she does not "fit in down home either" (581), as she puts it, it is largely because her own Cape Breton (multicultural) community is by no means willing to accommodate her unconventional sexual proclivities.

The inscription of agentive femininity against the exoticized simulacra of an androcentric backdrop fulfills a twofold function in *Fall on Your Knees*: while it implicates North American multiculturalism in the exoticist, consumer-oriented entertainment industry from the early decades of the twentieth century onward, it also throws into question the traditional and rigidly codified edicts of its gender politics. One of the corollaries of multiculturalism, MacDonald suggests, is the tendency to exoticize Orientals/Arabs and "otherize" lesbians, associating both with an aberrant hyper-sexuality that supposedly threatens to corrupt the moral and racial fibre of the

nation. James's rape/insemination of his daughter Kathleen, the central event of the novel, indicates a subliminal desire not only to wipe out her sexual perversity and her Arab genes but also to produce a "genetically pure" offspring; both literally and symbolically, the rape dramatizes society's phallicist pronouncement on its sexually and racially dissident members.

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MacDonald's postexotic re-reading of the discursive and cultural correlation between exoticism and multiculturalism in Canada is fundamentally linked to the significance she attributes to language. *Fall on Your Knees* reflects the multicultural make-up of Canadian society in terms of the racial diversity of its characters and the enriching polyphony that such diversity brings to the narrative. Although the linguistic richness of the text may be understood as an exoticizing marketing strategy on the author's part to appeal to a wider, multilingual readership in a multicultural society such as Canada, it also designates a commitment to a decentred narrative in which a multiplicity of competing and conflicting voices and subject positions are allowed tangible presence. As MacDonald suggests, the text's heteroglossia is not a mere celebration of a superficial linguistic diversity; rather it is an attempt "to include as much of what I see being there as possible, and enter into sympathy with the various points of view," even with something as destructive as "James' white whiteness" (Lockhart 139; 140).<sup>54</sup> *Fall on Your Knees* is rife with foreign languages and dialects (Arabic, Yiddish, Latin, Gaelic, French, Italian, and German). I shall focus here on the Arabic intertext because of its dual function in the novel: on the one hand, it signifies a Kristevan model of subversive motherhood that challenges the Anglo-centric paternalism of the

father/Father figure; on the other hand, it gestures toward a related Deleuzian model of rhizomatic identity formation within the larger context of Canada's multiculturalism.

Language for MacDonald is more than an instrument of communication. It is a receptacle of memory, intimacy, emotions, and instincts. When asked about the significance of the linguistic richness of her novel, MacDonald emphasizes the irreducible intimacy that one's mother tongue provides:

I feel language is a very, very tender relationship—the relationship with a mother tongue. Or a language that is being lost to you, a language that belonged to your parents, or a language that only belongs at home, you know? They are repositories. Emotional repositories. Repositories of history. [. . .] Language is a very intimate thing. It's like a loved one. And it's the poignancy of losing it and replacing it with another one. I find it very moving. And I also think it's to do with secret codes, as well, I mean, the little girls are closer to their mother as long as they're speaking Arabic. And if they don't have enough Arabic, they'll invent it. Invent a secret language that helps keep their bond alive, their connection to their mother. (Lockhart 141-42)

Earlier in the novel, both James and Materia use their respective mother tongues to express their passion for each other: "He sang her a Gaelic lullaby which made him cry because, if such a thing was possible, *he loved her more in his mother tongue*" (17; emphasis added). Materia also turns to Lebanese to express her love for James, at least until she graces him with a fair-skinned daughter toward whom he re-directs his passion: "'*Habibi*' [my love], she whispered, '*BeHebak*' [I love you]" (18). Moreover, Materia relies on the soothing music of Arabic lullabies and other endearing expressions of love (47) in order to bring herself to love and be loved by a daughter

(Kathleen) whom she secretly wished to have been a son, a son that would have helped her reconnect with her family and thus atone for the “*ayb*” (disgrace) she committed by eloping with a Protestant *inklese* (37; 20): “Feeding the child [Kathleen] some lovely mush at the kitchen table, Materia leaned forward and cooed, ‘*Ya Helwi. Ya albi, ya Amar. Te’berini*’ [Sweetie. My heart, my moon. You bury me]. The child smiled and Materia said a silent prayer of thanks, because at that moment she’d felt a faint breath of something not far from love” (42).

For MacDonald, language is inseparable from identity. There is an organic, biological, almost kinetically determined connection between the two:

The way we speak the language, and the language we speak, is part of our identity. I’m a different person when I speak French. I’m a different person when I speak German. [. . .] Something changes. These languages are all located in different places in our brains and tissues. Our tongue does different things, our face moves in a different way. It makes us say different things. It makes us think differently. And that’s why I feel there’s a very *organic*, a very *sensual* relationship with language. (Lockhart 144; emphasis added)

For the Piper sisters to renounce Arabic in favour of English, as commanded by their father before and after Materia’s death, would result in another death that is both literal and symbolic: the death of that which ties them emotionally and organically with their mother and consequently the death of their Arab identity. Therefore, the Piper sisters use the invented Arabic lingo (which I shall refer to as pidgin Arabic) not simply as “one of their special codes” to communicate and sometimes circumvent their father’s command (MacDonald, *Fall* 299), but also as a means whereby they retrieve the

memory of the mother and thus keep alive an organic, almost translinguistic connection to their Arab identity.

Initially, Arabic for Matria and her daughters is the means whereby they maintain a sense of belonging to the Old Country, to Lebanon “the Pearl of the Orient,” or to Beirut, “Paris of the Middle East” (106), and distinguish themselves from their multi-ethnic local community: “Mercedes and Frances understand that Arabic is something just between them and Mumma. There are many Arabic-speakers in Cape Breton by now, but the little sisters think they and their mother are the only ones, outside the mysterious population of that far-off place called the Old Country” (105). Retaining their heritage language, the Piper sisters are able to remain “closer to their mother,” to “keep their bond alive” (Lockhart 141-42):

*Inshallah* [God willing] is Lily’s magic word. It is from the language that she knows ought not to be used by day except in an emergency. Because the words are like wishes from a genie—don’t waste them. Lily has not even a rudimentary understanding of Arabic; it is, rather, dreamlike. At night in bed, long after lights-out, she and Frances speak the strange language. Their bed language. Frances uses half-remembered phrases and tells fragments of old stories, weaving them with pieces of songs, filling in the gap with her own made-up words that approximate the sounds of Mumma’s Old Country tongue. Lily converses fluently in the made-up language, unaware which words are authentic, which invented, which hybrid. The meaning resides in the music and the privacy of their magic carpet bed. *Arabian Nights*. (MacDonald, *Fall* 300)

Just as the Piper daughters mature and begin to forge a new hybrid identity in the new country, so their heritage language gradually metamorphoses into a self-invented communication tool that still retains their filiative ties to the Old Country.<sup>55</sup>

MacDonald conceives of language as the locus of an “organic” maternal bond: “I feel there’s a very *organic*, a very *sensual* relationship with language. Language is like a lover, or a *mother*, or a friend. Or the *most intimate* garment. You change when you speak it” (Lockhart 144-45; emphases added). And nowhere is this intimate, organic, and sensual relationship to the mother more manifest than in the “*sensually reproduced*” pidgin Arabic the Piper sisters use particularly after their mother’s death (Barthes 61).<sup>56</sup> The following is an intriguing sample of an exchange in pidgin Arabic between Frances and Lily. It is a customary but secret bedtime itty-bitty exercise in Arabic, English, Jewish, and Lebanese dialect:

“Frances. Al akbar Inshallah?”

“In fallah inti itsy-bitsy spider.”

“Ya koosa gingerbread boy kibbeh?”

“Shalom bi’ salami.”

“Aladdin bi’ sesame.”

“Bezella ya aini Beirut.”

“Te’berini.”

“Te’berini.”

“Tipperary.” (367-68)

The otherwise exotic language of the Middle East is rendered in bits and pieces with other fragments from familiar Western nursery rhymes, creating an uncanny motley of postexotic cadences. While it adumbrates MacDonald’s attempt to create a rhythm-

and-sound-based poetic language approximating that of the mother, pidgin Arabic also evokes *à la* Kristeva a desire for the maternal body, and this in defiance of the prescriptive monologism of James Piper's Anglo-centric knowledge. I read MacDonald through Kristeva because both conceive of poetic language, of which pidgin Arabic is a sample, as an invocation of a pre-symbolic, instinctual maternal bond that cuts through the Symbolic paternal order. While MacDonald achieves an enabling and liberating poetic effect in her text by emphasizing "the physicality and the sensuality of the [mother's] language" (Lockhart 155), Kristeva defines poetic language as "rhythm become substantive," as an evocation of that cathectic impulse that lures the speaking subject back to its pre-oedipal gestation in the maternal body.

In *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980), Kristeva understands poetic language in terms of a "*heterogeneousness* to meaning and signification" operating at the level of the Semiotic before the speaking subject enters the realm of the Symbolic (133; emphasis in original). While the Semiotic indicates a "signifying disposition" charged with instinctual drives (*chora*)<sup>57</sup> and connoting a dependence on as well as desire for an embodied maternal bond, the Symbolic indicates the beginning of a signifying consciousness governed by a (Husserlian) transcendental ego and instituted by the (Lacanian) Law of the Father after the experience of lack and then castration. The speaking subject, according to Kristeva, is a constantly split subject because of these two processes inherent in any attempt at signification. And poetic language cannot be defined by its "signifying economy" only, for "meaning and signification [. . .] do not exhaust [it]"; it must also be defined by its capacity to re-activate those instinctual, maternal drives within the Semiotic. The "semiotic activity" in poetic language therefore indicates a "signifying disposition" that has "no sign, no

predication, no signified object and therefore no operating consciousness of a transcendental ego” (133). Further quoting Kristeva,

[T]here is within poetic language (and therefore, although in a less pronounced manner, within any language) a *heterogeneousness* to meaning and signification. This *heterogeneousness*, detected genetically in the first echolalias of infants as rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, and sentences; this heterogeneousness, which is later reactivated as rhythms, intonations, glossolalias in psychotic discourse, serving as ultimate support of the speaking subject threatened by the collapse of the signifying function; this heterogeneousness to signification operates through, despite, and in excess of it and produces in poetic language “musical” but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself, that guarantee of thetic consciousness [. . .]. (133; emphasis in original)

The Piper sisters’ contorted, nonsensical Arabic speech, such as the exchange between Lily and Frances quoted above, is reminiscent of those echolalias and glossolalias that Kristeva attaches to the Semiotic operating within poetic language. Akin to an exercise in Jakobsonian aphasia, where the paradigmatic and syntagmatic order of speech is obviously out of order, pidgin Arabic becomes for the Piper sisters the “ultimate and primordial leash holding the body close to the mother before it can become a social speaking subject” (Kristeva 30). In their desire for a return *to* and/or *of* the mother, the Piper sisters invent a speech that elides that of the father. The playful exercise in word-coinage and unintelligible utterances becomes a cherished, dream-like occasion for an invocation of those primal, translinguistic “rhythms and

intonations” that predate Symbolicity itself. Facing the potential hegemony of the father’s language (English), a language that threatens to erase their Arabic-inflected identity, Lily and Frances nostalgically seek solace in the elemental musicality of the matriarchal tongue, in the sheer phonality of its pre-signifying stage that is “anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connoted to such an extent that it merits ‘not even the rank of syllable’” (133).

Through pidgin Arabic, the narrative establishes a postexotic connection between the daughters and their mother. The daughters’ invocation of the mother tongue (Arabic) seeks in vain to recuperate the sense of loss that marks the narrative’s enunciatory moment: “They’re all dead now” (MacDonald, *Fall* 1). Beginning with the end, Kristeva suggests with reference to another text, strips the narrative of “anecdotal interest” and devotes the storyline to retracing and “rebuilding that distance between life and death” (42), a distance encapsulated in the novel’s second inauguration of the Piper family’s history: “A long time ago, before you were born, there lived a family called Piper on Cape Breton Island” (MacDonald, *Fall* 7). Pidgin Arabic undercuts the seeming exoticist subtext of the narrative while re-enforcing the translinguistic, embodied aspects of the maternal bond and articulating the desire of the speaking and already split Subject to return to “the place of [its first] splitting,” to that “simultaneously dual and alien space” at the threshold of the mother’s womb where the primal experience of separation and abjection takes place precisely at the moment of birth. That Lily is made the expert in re-inventing “Mumma’s Old Country tongue” is highly significant, not the least because she is both at the centre of that space and the ultimate vehicle for articulating what Kristeva calls “Motherhood’s impossible syllogism” (Kristeva, *Desire* 238); that is, she is at one and the same time the object of

that primal maternal abjection/splitting and the subject of its postextotic narrative enunciation.

The second book of *Fall on Your Knees* opens with a particularly disturbing scene not only because of the gory, graphic detail in which it is rendered, but also because it marks the site of primal, maternal separation, a separation whose echoes and echolalias return to haunt the referential grounds of Lily's "strange language" (MacDonald, *Fall* 300). On Armistice Day, James Piper, now back from the war, receives an anonymous letter following which he hastily summons Kathleen back from New York. Eight months later, we know she is pregnant and is lying in the attic waiting to give birth. Using "the old kitchen scissors," Materia decides to undertake the Caesarean surgery herself, killing her own daughter and saving only one of the twins, Lily (166). Ambrose, the other male twin, dies shortly afterward of an injury on his ankle caused by the scissors cutting through the mother's abdomen. Eventually realizing that she has done "the right thing" (to have saved the children)—in keeping with the teachings of the Catholic Church—"for the wrong reason" (to have eliminated her own child/rival under the pretext of mercy-killing), Materia undergoes a fatal crisis of faith that renders her life a horrifying impossibility (168-69). Three days later, she takes her own life using the gas oven.

In this birth-giving/life-taking scene, MacDonald enacts the horror of potential death that haunts the self at the moment of its birth. While it describes the precariousness of inhabiting, albeit momentarily, that liminal space where the pre-self is *within* and *without* the mother's womb at the same time, the birthing of the twins symbolizes the first act of the self's traumatic separation from the mother and its expulsion/abjection into the outside world. Here is how MacDonald renders the

twofold process of abjection whereby Kathleen is cast *out of* the world as incestuous (m)other all the while her two infants are cast *into* the world as as-yet-unsplit subjectivity.

The air splashes and spumes against it, threatening to drown it—*them*—for there are two but they have yet to be cut in half, they are still one creature, really, male and female segments joined at the belly by a common root system. It—they is a blood breather and could drown in this fatal spray of oxygen, will drown if they remain silent much longer, will become bright blue fishes in a moment. But the cords are cut, *snip-snap*, and tied just in time, and in an instant the shocking air is gulped and strafed into the lungs. They become babies just in time; slick, bloody, new, wailing, squinting, furious, two. (166-67)

On the one hand, the birthing scene evokes what Kristeva describes in *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (1982) as the subject's "pre-objectal relationship," that is, the subject's pre-Symbolic consciousness of the world as Law and as an alterity that is outside of and underived from the self (10). As Anne Williams puts it, "[b]efore the speaking subject organizes itself around the split between itself and the other objects, it experiences the 'abject' (the 'cast off') as a sort of 'pre-object'" (74). While separating the Piper twins from their mother may represent the unavoidable, primal trauma of pre-objectal abjection, separating them from each other stands for the originary split within subjectivity itself as it enters the world of Symbolicity. To be able to fit into the order of the Signifier, that is, to interrupt its pre-natal silence and birth itself into a speaking/signifying subject, the self must surrender its inchoate ambivalence and amorphousness ("it-they") and become a definite and definable entity, an entity that is "nameable... totalizeable," and thus repressible (Kristeva, *Powers* 17).

Lily and Ambrose represent, amongst other things, the two sides of a split subjectivity. While that split results in Ambrose's etherealization into Lily's ghostly double haunting the margins of the narrative, Lily carries its embodied mark on her crippled foot (as a result of her breech birth) and more symbolically in the "rhythms and intonations" of her Arabic-inflected, bedtime language.

Pidgin Arabic is not simply a paean to motherhood enhancing the carnivalesque quality of MacDonald's text. Either defined in terms of heteroglossia by Bakhtin or reconceptualized in terms of intertextuality by Kristeva later, the carnival denotes essentially a parodic discursive practice. Drawing on this Bakhtinian-Kristevan conceptualization of carnival, I would argue that pidgin Arabic is the site of both the polyphonic and the parodic and thus the ultimate manifestation of MacDonald's strategic exoticism. It grafts itself onto English, infusing it with subversive uncanniness, all the while producing a new carnivalesque mode of signification devoid of hierarchies and structures. As a polyphony, pidgin Arabic sets itself over and against the prescriptive monologism of the father's English. Revelling in its chaotic, child-like ramblings, it summons the language of the mother in such a way as to exorcize, literally and symbolically, that of the Father, ransacking its axiology and subverting its logic: "Ya koosa gingerbread boy kibbeh?" By virtue of its carnivalesque thrust, it cannot be but self-parodic, undermining its function as representation and avoiding "becoming either the scene of law or the scene of its parody" (Kristeva, *Desire* 80).

Pidgin Arabic defies the teleological structure of the Father's language in such a way as to attain what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a linguistic "plane of consistency" wherein a multiplicity of heightened tensions and relations are at constant

play. Pidgin Arabic in MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*, like the Beur vernacular in Sebbar's *Shérazade*, is an invented/distorted lingo that functions not simply as a secret communication code deployed by the characters to escape domestic (MacDonald) and public (Sebbar) oppression but also as the mark of their ineluctably hybridized and cross-cultural identity. It is the mark of dismantled binarisms, the rhizomatic signifier of the constant becomingness of the hybrid and nomadic Subject. The rhizome, according to Deleuze and Guattari, revolutionizes the conception of language; it plays havoc with its logocentric underpinnings, with its root structures and its dichotomous ramifications, with the totalizing power of its Chomsky-esque genealogy (transformative grammar): "Chomsky's grammaticality, the categorical S symbol that dominates every sentence, is more fundamentally a marker of power than a syntactic marker." By virtue of its multi-dimensionality, its inherent multiplicity, the rhizome elevates language to a higher level of abstraction where "semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" are continuously at play. For "there is no language in itself": "There is no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogenous linguistic community. [. . .] There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 7).

Because he does not want them to grow up confused, James prevents his daughters from speaking Arabic and orders them and their mother to speak English instead (MacDonald, *Fall* 40; 42). Secretly disobeying their father's command, however, the sisters invoke that of the mother to help them create a language of their own, a language that, like a rhizome, is defined essentially by its "anti-genealogy" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 11), by its ever-growing multiplicity and

semiotic freedom that defy the power of one language over another (English over Arabic, in this case). Akin to playful baby talk, the sisters' made-up language is stripped of all "linguistic universals" and is re-constructed freely and arbitrarily out of "a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 7).

The Arabic intertext in *Fall on Your Knees* contributes to the novel's re-inscription of an ineluctably multiple and shifting cultural identity. The insertion of Arabic words, expressions, and folkloric songs into the texture of the novel and the ultimate transformation of the Arabic text into a linguistic medium of subversion detached from the language of the Self or the Same as a point of reference assigns Arab alterity a decidedly de-familiarizing presence, on the one hand, and an enriching contribution to the text's overall heteroglossia, on the other. Just as she transcends gender identity by dis-ordering its external trappings—through cross-dressing and passing, that is—MacDonald redefines racial and cultural identity by scripting it within an "asignifying and asubjective" plane of consistency (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 9) in which the original mother-father tongues (Arabic and English) are cross-bred into a new free-floating medium of expression (pidgin) that becomes the unmistakable insignia of the new, multi-tongued nomad subject (the Piper sisters, particularly the hybrid and pidgin expert Lily). Ultimately, pidgin Arabic becomes the sign of the smooth link between the immigrant, multicultural subject and the mother(land). Both the poetics of exotic longing suggested by Materia's Arabic lullaby songs, dances and delicacies and the politics of prescriptive Euro-Anglo-centrism suggested by James's bookish learning and teaching eventually dissipate into the boundless, postexotic possibilities of their daughters' made-up lingo. MacDonald

dismantles the binary logic informing Canada's hyphenated subjectivities (the Old Country versus the new country) by using pidgin Arabic as a linguistic rhizome on the pyre of which the multicultural hyphen is sacrificed.

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Although the setting of *Fall on Your Knees* predates the institutionalization of Canadian Multiculturalism, MacDonald's postexotic tropes reveal the Orientalist underpinnings as well as the white, male-centered rhetoric that informed its earlier formulations. Canada's Arab female immigrants in particular, such as the first-generation Mahmoud daughters and then the second-generation Piper sisters, often find their identity delimited (or pigeonholed) by the classificatory multicultural paradigm. Escaping a heritage culture they come to see as intolerably patriarchal, many female Arab-Canadians find themselves trapped in a new metropolitan one whose prevailing media stereotypes and normative moral traditions either relegate them to the status of exotic commodities or dismiss them as social and moral misfits. Occasionally, however, and in a bid to better their social and economic condition, ethnic women and visible minorities in general resort to the marketing of their perceived exoticness (as Kathleen imagines herself doing in the novel), thus re-enforcing rather than countering the culture of *marked* difference that official multiculturalism tends to promote and that many critics continue to expose. Moreover, inter-ethnic tension and domestic violence are revealed to be the inevitable consequences not only of normative, self-centered perceptions of difference but also of a state policy that has proved incapable of providing an adequate multicultural framework that accounts for the *fundamental* differences among Canada's ethnic groups. MacDonald's aesthetic vision, as I read it

*Fall on Your Knees*, seems to suggest that in the imaginative space of the literary text such differences can be accommodated, meaningful trans-racial and trans-gender relations can be forged, and possibilities of self-renewal and acceptance can be discovered. Within the imaginatively expansive power of story telling, language becomes a bendable receptacle that accommodates and fuses, not erases, various and even contradictory imaginings of the world. Infused with the phonic rhythms and sensorial pulses of the mother tongue (Arabic), MacDonald's text points to the possibility of envisioning a malleable, rhizomatic modality of signification that not only moves beyond the paternalism of the Father figure, but that may also inspire an alternative to the delimiting, Anglo-centric theoretical articulations of multiculturalism. The postexotic tropes I trace in this chapter delineate the contours of an imaginatively self-reflexive literary discourse, one that inventively pushes the limits of its referential scope and that might be more resonant with Canada's multicultural reality.

## Chapter Three

### Andalusian Poetics: Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and The Limits of Hybridity

“Oh Bombay! *Prima in Indis! Gateway to India! Star of the East with her face to the West!* Like Granada–al-Gharnatah of the Arabs–you were the glory of your time.”

*The Moor's Last Sigh*, 372

When María Rosa Menocal's *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* was published in 2002, it was celebrated as a refreshing study of Andalusian cultural history and especially as a timely lesson in tolerance and peaceful co-existence in a world increasingly driven by interfaith hostilities. The back cover blurbs illustrate this amply. While Anne Barlett of the *Miami Herald* praises Menocal for “successfully driv[ing] home an important lesson for a multicultural America fighting fanaticism externally and internally,” Christopher Hitchens applauds Little Brown's choice of “the perfect moment” to publish Menocal's book. Claudia Roden of the *Wall Street Journal* also emphasizes the timeliness of *The Ornament of the World*, for it reveals to its readership “another face of Islam,” a face which has been overlooked “since a great fear of extremist Islamic fundamentalism has gripped the West following September 11.” Reviving the “ethos of tolerance, the ‘sweetness’ and ‘light’ of Andalusia,” as Emran Qureishi of the Canadian *National Post* puts it, Menocal's book stands as “a useful study of what once was and what could be.” The book's welcome contribution to a debate that focuses on an emerging “ferocious version of Islam” is made the more obvious by the postscript that Menocal wrote shortly after the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. (282).

It is hard not to dismiss the zeal behind the book's advertising blurbs ("illuminating and inspiring," "skilful," "unusually graceful," "splendid," "fascinating") as conventional publicity practices that partake of a growing global Islam industry and that may not genuinely reflect the (de)merits of Menocal's book. Their import, however, lies precisely in what they tell us about the politics of neo-exoticism undergirding the massively proliferating scholarship about Arabs and Islam, a scholarship a good portion of which is unfortunately second-rate and based on consumer-oriented, sensationalized vulgarizations.

Through a survey of Andalusia's cultural history, which Menocal frames within a pleasing fairytale-like narrative, the book prompts its readers to reflect on the possibilities of cultural and political tolerance within the context of the "clash of civilizations" discourse engendered by the recent political crises. Medieval Arab Spain is often evoked as a long-gone "Golden Age," where religious differences did not prevent the efflorescence of a rich tradition of cultural interchange and unprecedented scientific progress.<sup>58</sup> Such a tradition is commonly described in terms of what the historian Americo Castro calls *convivencia*, designating the period of "living togetherness" amongst "the three castes" from the tenth to the late fifteenth century (584). Revising what they perceived as Castro's idealist vision of Andalusia's *convivencia*, later critics and historiographers have persistently argued that the term suggests less an interfaith utopia than a period in the Iberian Peninsula's history where relations among the three co-existing faith-communities were characterized both by fusion and friction, by moments of undisturbed acculturation as well as moments of conflict and mutual distrust.<sup>59</sup> More relevant to my purposes, however, are the implications of such re-invested interest in Moorish Spain both as a political model to

be invoked in a post-9/11 World Disorder as well as a geo-cultural space constantly defined by its exotic allure within a metropolitan market economy increasingly trading in matters exotic.<sup>60</sup> My reading of Salman Rushdie's 1996 novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* (*MLS*) seeks to elucidate these implications within the specific context of religious communalism in the Indian subcontinent.

Much as Menocal's study is hailed as a timely and refreshing re-examination of Arab Spain's cultural heritage, so too Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* can be lauded for its invocation of such a heritage as an alternative to subcontinental sectarian politics. As Rushdie's first full-length post-fatwa work of fiction, however, the book remains intriguingly tainted with "pessoptimistic" overtones, for the dying protagonist's ultimate desire to awake to a world more like medieval Andalusia than strife-ridden India is left an open-ended possibility.<sup>61</sup> This chapter will argue that Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* inscribes a postexotic Andalusian Arabness that grows out of the shadow of the fatwa affair and out of Rushdie's misgivings about the capacity of artistic hybridity and an Indian-style *convivencia* to counteract intractable communal terrorism. Moreover, the publication of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, as well as the indeterminacy of its ending, indicates Rushdie's determination, not only to move beyond—even if tentatively—the *succès de scandale* of *The Satanic Verses* and the subsequent upheaval it generated, but also to continue the project on which he has embarked since his 1981 Booker Prize winner *Midnight's Children* (*MC*).<sup>62</sup> After the proclamation of the fatwa, Edward Said stated that "Rushdie is the *intifada*"<sup>63</sup> of the imagination" and that "[h]is case is not really about offense to Islam, but a spur to go on struggling for democracy that has been denied us, and the courage not to stop" (Anouar 261). Rushdie's re-appearance on the literary and public scene with the

publication of *The Moor's Last Sigh* was somehow the fulfillment of that *intifada*, of the unavoidable everyday struggle of the artist's imagination, in the face of intimidation, fear and death.

Sadly enough, the 9/11 attack has delivered yet another warrant of denied democracy, the atrocity of which has irrevocably changed the way we think and imagine the world. Many artists-intellectuals have found themselves all of a sudden facing a reality that resists representability. Rushdie, for instance, repeatedly suggests, particularly in his post-9/11 journalistic writings, that the only certain effect of such events is the utter failure of the artist's imagination. In his recent non-fiction collection of essays, *Step Across This Line (Step)*, he writes:

Like every writer in the world, I am trying to find a way of writing after September 11, 2001, a day that has become something like a borderline. Not only because the attacks were a kind of invasion but because we all crossed a frontier that day, an invisible boundary between the imaginable and the unimaginable, and it turned out to be the unimaginable that was real. (376)

Can poetry be written after the World Trade Center, to echo Adorno's famous Auschwitz dictum? Not that the event is so horrifying and so overwhelmingly immediate that no possible response to it can be articulated or imagined, but the system of truth, the logic under which it operates, remains impenetrable by the poet's mind's eye (During 450). In the aftermath of the tragic event, public commentators, artists, and especially postcolonial and Arab Muslim intellectuals are grappling with a litany of conundrums: What alternative modalities of theoretical enquiry and/or aesthetic re-imaginings are required in order to articulate one's response to the 9/11 events as well as to the ensuing and highly mediatized sense of Islamophobia? How do we do so

without getting entangled in such reductive categories as ethnicity, nation, and religion which are finding renewed currency and legitimacy in what Akbar S. Ahmed calls the post-9/11 “Grand Narratives” (x)? To what extent—if at all—are today’s postcolonial theorizations about secular nation-states, transnational subjectivities, and cultural hybridity effective in responding to discourses of civilizational struggle in which “the national” and “the religious” have been resuscitated as quintessential, if not destructive, categories of identity formation and criteria for global policy-making decisions? Has what Julia Kristeva calls “thinking in dark times” become the public intellectual’s impossible task (“Thinking” 13)?

In “Not about Islam?” Rushdie insists on the modernization of Islam as a necessary measure in countering the global rise of Islamic fanaticism. In order for Islam “to be reconciled with modernity,” he suggests, one must listen to those “secularist analysts with roots in the Muslim world” (such as Rushdie himself) whose intellectual endeavors will bring forth a progressive Islamic modernity derived from the “secularist-humanist principles on which the modern is based” (*Step* 341). In another essay, “The Attacks on America,” written a month earlier, Rushdie defines Islamic fundamentalism by that which it rejects: “Such people are against freedom of speech, a multi-party political system, universal adult suffrage, accountable government, Jews, homosexuals, women’s rights, pluralism, secularism, short skirts, dancing, beardlessness, evolution theory, sex.” After labelling such people “tyrants, not Muslims,” Rushdie calls on “Muslims everywhere” to enquire as to “why it is that the faith they love breeds so many violent mutant strains” (*Step* 338). This infelicitous slippage into reductively inflammatory journalistic moralism may still be excused by some on account of the shocking immediacy of the events; yet Rushdie’s later

intimation that it is high time that Islam caught up with (Western) modernity leaves one with the impression that freedom of speech and wearing short skirts are what modernity is all about.<sup>64</sup> As Sawhney and Sawhney put it, Rushdie's conflation of a depoliticized Islam (that is, an Islam relegated to the realm of the personal, such as dancing or not growing a beard) and a modern Islam is cause for serious concern. For such an equivalence between the non-political, the personal, and the secular on the one hand, and the modern, on the other, is "insufficiently aware of the historical forces at play," to say the least (Sawhney and Sawhney 434). Moreover, Rushdie's idea of an Islamic modernity leaves one with a number of vexed interrogations: How do we define the modern today, and whose standards of judgement and valuation are to be used in such a definition? What kind of modernity is Rushdie proposing for Islam? Are we to understand the modern in terms of the Western, the secular in terms of the democratic? How do we read the Western principle of secular democracy within the context of an Islamic theocracy? Although Rushdie does not produce sufficient answers to such questions (at least not in this essay), his reference to the hitherto neglected secular-minded Muslim intellectuals as *the* key figures in this modernization-of-Islam project is a compelling one. At any rate, the kind of progressive Islamic modernity that Rushdie preaches is of a piece with the one advocated by many intellectuals across the Arab Muslim world today.

Arab-Moroccan scholar Anouar Majid, for instance, takes to task, and rightly so, today's postcolonial critics for fighting shy of a serious engagement with Islam, not least perhaps because of what they consider as its essentialist "regime of truth": "That postcolonial theory has been particularly inattentive to the question of Islam in the global economy exposes its failure to incorporate different regimes of truth into a

genuinely multicultural global vision” (19). Majid here borrows the phrase “regime of truth” from Michel Foucault who uses it to describe the Iranians in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. According to Foucault, the Iranians, like the Greeks and the Arabs of North Africa, have systems of thought whose internal logic sometimes proves unsettlingly impervious to Western methods of enquiry (159)—something which explains the noticeable “remoteness of Islam” from current postcolonial discourses about secularism, globalization, and multiculturalism (3). Although “the Rushdie affair did more than any event [. . . to] bring postcolonial fiction into the mainstream,” postcolonial theory has done little to resituate Islam within today’s globalization discourse as a constitutive field of knowledge that has its inherent value and truth claims and that is closely interconnected with other competing “regimes of truth” (vii). And this is mainly due to the secular foundations of contemporary theory in general from whose investigative and epistemological orbit Islam is persistently distanced (3).

Whether or not Islam is secularizable is still a subject of much controversy both in the East and the West.<sup>65</sup> One of the elements fuelling such a controversy relates to the fact that “secularism is originally a Western idea born out of specific historical circumstances” (42).<sup>66</sup> It is often suggested that Islam’s resistance to Western-style, secular modernity is behind the unfinished business of Arab nationalism (especially in the Egypt of President Nasser), which arose during the early decades of the twentieth century in many Arab countries and declined in the aftermath of the 1967 setback of the Arab-Israeli War. One of the main challenges of pan-Arab nationalism was how to embrace a Western-inspired *secular* model of the nation-state that does not necessarily remove the *sacred* from its vocabulary—for the Quran, the sacred foundational Islamic text, was and still is one of the irremovable cornerstones of identification among the

majority of Arab-speaking nations (Majid 57). Although the outlines of Majid's project of an inherently progressive Islam and Rushdie's insistence on a secular Islamic modernity remain ideologically and theoretically blurred, both have to be credited for underlining the crucial role to be played by moderate Muslim intellectuals in mediating an Islamic Reformation that emanates from within the Islamic tradition itself, rather than imposed upon it from outside. (I shall return to this idea of alien modernity in my discussion in *The Moor's Last Sigh* of Nehru's modernization of post-independence India.)

*The Satanic Verses* represents ways in which a symbiotic relationship can be re-imagined from within the tradition of Islam between the power of imaginative, self-referential art and the possibilities of a secular Islamic modernity. The potential actualization of such a symbiosis unfortunately came to a screeching halt, as many orthodox Muslims have read and rallied against it as an uncalled for desecration of Islam. Ironically, the hue and cry stirred by *The Satanic Verses* has further consecrated its author as a postcolonial literary celebrity.<sup>67</sup> Timothy Brennan claims that Rushdie's book has reached worldwide notoriety not because of its purportedly blasphemous passages (which were often the reason why many Muslims decided to read, or not to read, the book)<sup>68</sup> but because Rushdie had already been established, especially after the international success of *Midnight's Children*, "as a best-selling novelist who managed to popularise real Indian history and customs for a mass Western reading public" (*Salman Rushdie* 144). While Brennan believes that Rushdie's prominent cosmopolitan status helped transform *The Satanic Verses* into a *cause célèbre*, Keith M. Booker argues that it was indeed the fatwa that made Rushdie "best known in the West" and not the fact that he had been awarded the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary Booker Prize for

“the finest novel produced in the British Commonwealth since 1969” (5).<sup>69</sup> Sadik J. Al-Azm, on the other hand, situates the far-reaching repercussions of the Rushdie affair within a specific historical juncture where the appearance of *The Satanic Verses* (1988) coincided with the fall of the last barrier before the onrush of global capitalism—namely, “the collapse of European communism and the consequent rapid demise of the Soviet Union itself.” It was the tidal wave of globalization that transformed Rushdie’s book “from what may have never gone beyond an internal Muslim scandal and quarrel into a world-wide explosion” (“*The Satanic Verses*” 48). While it remains debatable whether or not Rushdie had anticipated the hijacking of his book by the Western media and its transformation into yet another “fable of Western freedom vs. Oriental fanaticism” (63), as many critics have suggested (Brennan, *Salman Rushdie* 144; Booker 5; Majid 36-38), more questions are now being posed as to why the book, oddly enough, instigated more violent responses in the West and in non-Arab Muslim nations than it did in the Arab world.

When convicted of blasphemy and “Uncle-Tomism” after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie forswore the Muslim faith as someone who had been “sold the secular ideal” a long time ago (*Imaginary Homelands* 16).<sup>70</sup> As the fatwa fueled more violence, however, Rushdie publicly embraced Islam in a desperate bid to “make [his] peace” with it and thus reconnect with the Muslim communities which had been his source of “strength and inspiration” but from which he was now suddenly “cast out” (434-44). In the 1992 edition of *Imaginary Homelands (IH)*, Rushdie rescinds his earlier public conversion by replacing the essay “Why I Have Embraced Islam,” where he professed the Islamic faith immediately after the fatwa, with “One Thousand Days in a Balloon,” where he clarifies the kind of Islam with which he wants

to be associated. More assertively, Rushdie now claims to have embraced Islam not as a “blind belief,” but as a “culture,” a “civilization,” and as “*family and light*” (IH 435; emphasis in original). In defence of his “humanized, historicized, secularized way of being Muslim” and of his earlier public conversion, Rushdie quotes none other than his “near-namesake,” the famous Andalusian philosopher-cum-theologian Ibn Rushd, also known as Averroes (1126-1198): ““not all the words of the Qu’ran should be taken literally. When the literal meaning of the Qu’ranic verses appeared to contradict the truths to which philosophers arrived by the exercise of reason, those verses needed to be interpreted metaphorically”” (IH 436). Rushdie could not have hoped for more fitting advice on how to interpret *The Satanic Verses* than that of Ibn Rushd on how to unpack the embedded meanings of the Quran. Although Ibn Rushd also insists that revisionary readings of the Islamic text must remain the exclusive enterprise of philosophers and *ulamas*, that is, those trained in Quranic exegesis and religious jurisprudence, Rushdie still finds the philosopher’s insights “fit for everybody, the beggar as well as the prince,” if ever there is hope for the “modernization of Muslim thought” to take place (IH 436).

Whatever the motivations of Rushdie’s “recantation of the recantation” (Al-Azm, “*The Satanic Verses*” 52), he—along with many Arab and Muslim intellectuals—has unapologetically insisted that the fatwa was more of an Iranian political manoeuvre than a purely theological dispute (IH 410).<sup>71</sup> And his notorious public conversion to Islam—what he later qualified as “the worst mistake [he] ever made” (Reder 211)—must be understood more in terms of his desire for conciliation than his surrender to the dictates of what is called the “Actually Existing Islam”: “There is a point beyond which conciliation looks like capitulation. I do not believe I passed that point, but others have

thought otherwise. I have never disowned my book, nor regretted writing it” (IH 437). When Rushdie apologized for unintentionally offending Muslim sensibility and agreed initially to suspend the publication of a forthcoming paperback edition of *The Satanic Verses*, it was in the hope of creating what he called “a space for conciliation” (438). It was not till six years later, however, that his first post-fatwa novel, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, attempted to imagine that space. The novel, Rushdie remarks, has “changed the air. Suddenly *Satanic Verses* feels really like a long time ago, and people want to talk about books again, and it just seems to have cleared up something” (Reder 199).

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The title of the book, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, enunciates what appears to be an elegiac tale about a fallen empire, for it refers to the last Nasrid King’s sigh after he hands over the keys of the Alhambra, the last seat of Muslim power in Europe, to the conquering Catholic Monarchs of Spain, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. Yet what unfolds thereafter turns out to be a Jewish-Indian yarn about family feuds, betrayal, disillusioned artists, caste politics, and communal violence—all spun five centuries later (1992) by an anomalously fast-aging narrator-protagonist. A postmodern mock-epic, the novel chronicles the rise and fall of the four-generation spice-trading Zogoiby family; it is narrated à la *Tristram Shandy* by Moraes Zogoiby, alias Moor, the son of the double-dealing spice merchant Abraham Zogoiby, a Spanish Jew and presumably the illegitimate descendant of the Arab sultan Abu Abdullah of Andalusia (known as Boabdil) and the Catholic matriarch-cum-artist Aurora da Gama, descendant of the renowned Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama. From within an Alhambra-like citadel in Benengeli,<sup>72</sup> Spain, where he is held captive by Vasco Miranda, a decidedly second-

rate artist and Aurora's spurned lover, Moor, like Scheherazade under the threat of death, protracts his own life by spinning the yarn of the Zogoiby-da Gama saga—from his premature birth and anomalous high-speed aging, through his family's business feuds, to his fatal visit to Benengeli to recuperate his mother's painting, also called *The Moor's Last Sigh*, which Vasco has stolen by way of avenging himself on the Zogoibys for their ill-treatment of him.<sup>73</sup>

If Rushdie conceded that the story of the Arab king's expulsion was simply the bare bone which he draped with the flesh of Moraes's family saga (Reder 156), then one wonders why he chose such a notoriously exotic figure as Boabdil himself. The title of Rushdie's book does not simply invoke the end of an Islamic empire; it also invokes the sybaritic pleasures of the Cordoban courts and the royal fineries of the Granadan emirates with which Rushdie's Western audience is all too familiar and about which it is ever desirous to know a bit more.<sup>74</sup> How immune, therefore, is Rushdie from the charge frequently levelled against him after *Midnight's Children's* success, namely, that his "manipulation of history" caters to the "the exoticist predilections of his Western metropolitan reading public" (Huggan 71-72)? Moreover, if one takes into account the perceived pro-West strain in his recent non-fiction pieces, then one wonders whether "those who had always dismissed [him] as another panderer to Western tastes for the colonial exotic [were] right after all" (Sawhney and Sawhney 435). Graham Huggan's response to such accusations is worth noting. He asserts that these are untenable for two main reasons. First, they are based on the mere assumption that Rushdie had a specific (i.e., Western) audience in mind, as if audiences were homogeneous entities that can be "neatly separable by ethnicity, class, gender, [and] location" (72). Second, and more importantly, the claim that Rushdie is simply a Third

World comprador figure for a “wonder-seeking Western readership” is usually undercut by “the strategically exoticist methods by which he draws attention to his novel as an object of Western consumption” (72).<sup>75</sup>

Rushdie, in Huggan’s view, is self-consciously contributing to an emerging Indo-Anglian literary tradition whose “capacity for an ironic recycling of the clichés that have historically dominated Orientalist representation” has itself acquired the appeal of the exotic (80). Drawing on what Vladimir Nabokov considers as the translator’s “worst crime,” namely “vilely beautifying” the original text so as to please his or her target audience, Rushdie notes the recent development of a highly self-parodic Indo-Anglian fiction in which India is translated into something more than a “Western experience of India”:

This exoticization of India, its “vile beautification,” is what Indians disliked most. Now at last, this kind of fake glamorizing is coming to an end, and the India of elephants, tigers, peacocks, emeralds, and dancing girls is being laid to rest. A generation of gifted Indian writers in English is bringing into English their many different versions of the Indian reality, and these many versions, taken together, are beginning to add up to something that one might call the truth. (*Step* 374-75)

While a whiff of the exotic may continue to cling to Rushdie’s fictional work, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, I want to suggest, consistently problematizes and is constantly alive to the ways in which (even) the subversive content of hybrid fiction can be absorbed by the dominant discourse and recycled into a dehistoricized, innocuous exotic commodity.

The story of Granada’s downfall provides the “background” for the failure of

India's pluralism. In fact, it is woven into the narrative of *The Moor's Last Sigh* "as a kind of metaphor for modern India and for the ruptures of cultures not only in India but in the modern world" (Reder 202). The Spanish re-conquest of Granada prefigures the destruction of Indian pluralism by Hindu and Muslim fanatics. The *mise-en-abîme* of the Granadan theme is therefore read by a sizable number of critics as the signature of Rushdie's engagement with fundamentalism and pluralism as competing discourses in India's national and cultural history. Such critics invariably argue that *The Moor's Last Sigh* conjures the history of Arab Spain as a viable multicultural model that the author wished for post-independence India (Cantor 325; Cundy 111; Ghosh 137). The emergence of "anti-democratic political leaders," the alarming rise of Hindu nationalism, and the global market economy—all have shattered the democratic-secularist vision that Gandhi and Nehru had for India after independence. *The Moor's Last Sigh*, in this sense, represents "an elegy for [a] lost age" (Chauhan 210), for an age when different religions, cultures, and ethnicities could have existed—palimpsestically, as it were—the way they did in Arab Spain four and half centuries ago (Cundy 113; Hassumani 115; Deszcz 40).<sup>76</sup> Other critics, by contrast, draw attention to the relation between Rushdie's narrativization of the fall of Granada and his expressed misgivings about an overvalorization of multiculturalism and cultural hybridity as postmodern modalities of subject identification. Paul Cantor, for instance, suggests that Rushdie turns to Arab Spain as a "historical alternative to [India's] sad spectacle of religious violence" (325). In this case, the multicultural model inspired by the Andalusian *convivencia* seems to resolve the "problem that has figuratively and literally torn India apart in the twentieth century" (324). But Cantor also reminds us that Rushdie is not unaware of the shortcomings of multiculturalism, for it may become an index for a

“false hybridity of culture, in which the common currency is literally money and the cultural complements are unified only by being reduced to a basket of commodities and thus emptied of all genuine content” (337). Dohra Ahmad goes even further and suggests that Rushdie calls upon “Arab Andalusia’s last sultan, the weak and quixotic Boabdil” not only “to mourn the loss of a tolerant, multi-cultural India” (11-12) but also to reveal how fundamentalism and hybridity may become “distorted versions of each other” (1).

While taking my cue from Cantor’s and Ahmad’s arguments specifically, I want to suggest that Rushdie’s postmodern superimposition of Andalusian history and India’s national narrative in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* is less a nostalgia for an exotic and lost Golden Age than an attempt to map out the limits of postcolonial hybridity as a purportedly empowering subject position. Removed from its Moorish setting and grafted onto India’s national history, Boabdil’s legend not only indexes the imbrications of various historical and national narratives,<sup>77</sup> but it also helps re-think the relationship between modern memory and the past, politics and representation, in the articulation of a contemporary hybrid subjectivity. Closely analyzing Rushdie’s appropriation of Boabdil’s notorious story in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, one often alights on suggestive allusions to the potential pitfalls of naively reverting one’s gaze toward a past, medieval Arab-Spain in this case, as the possible locus of a recoverable multicultural utopia. Rushdie’s westward-looking invocation of the ostensibly glittering but bygone glory of Arab Andalusia from within the murky pandemonium of modern subcontinental politics, as suggested by many critics, is less the signature of a nostalgic idealist searching for a *proto*-multicultural model than an exercise in parodic postexoticism. The post-exotic in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, I conclude, becomes a useful

trope that, first, moves beyond what Chris Bongie describes with reference to fin-de-siècle exoticism as a “discursive practice intent on recovering ‘elsewhere’ values ‘lost’ with the modernization of European society” (5); and, second, allows Rushdie to uncover the corrupt structures of corporate capitalism and state power and to re-map the contours of a postcolonial Indo-Anglian cultural praxis moored in the history of India’s religious and national politics.

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If *The Satanic Verses* is dismissed by many Muslim fundamentalists because of its purported desecration of Islam, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* seems to trump Islamic fundamentalism by going behind it and condemning fundamentalism *en bloc*, be it religious, political, or even artistic, as I shall demonstrate later (D. Ahmad 2-3). Its satire takes aim at that political and religious “fanatic fringe” which threatens to disrupt the “composite entity” of Indian society, in the same way that the “composite culture of Andalusia” was destroyed by “Christian fundamentalism” (Reder 203).

Rushdie is not the first to invoke Arab Spain in order to articulate current concerns about colonialism, politics, religion, and cultural identity. Moorish Spain was a source of inspiration for many seventeenth-century dramatic texts in Britain. But it is to the nineteenth-century British and American Romantic tradition that it owes much of its modern appeal. And if Boabdil’s notorious sigh at the loss of the last stronghold of Muslim power in Europe continues to be wrapped in the mantle of Eastern exotic sentimentality, it is due mainly to its popularization by such prominent literary figures as Lord Byron and Washington Irving.<sup>78</sup> In an article tracing the configurations of the Andalusian theme in the literary imagination of the British Romantics, Diego Saglia

argues that Arab Spain figures “as one of the exotic locales *par excellence* [. . .], a geographic, cultural and temporal elsewhere far removed from the mundane aspects of contemporary reality” (194). All too often, Andalusia is projected by the British Romantics as an ideal(ized) *topos* for intercultural encounters—encounters between the familiar and the non-familiar characteristic of representations of the exotic. Drawing on Henry Remak’s and Roger Célestin’s definitions of the exotic as a foreign and distant setting for the re-cycling of desires and anxieties at home, Saglia claims that British Romantic poetry uses Granada as a far-flung, uncharted transit zone where the polarities of Self versus Other, Here versus There, West versus East, are (temporarily) projected, re-charted, and re-negotiated before the narrating Romantic Subject returns Home with a presumably enlightened vision (194-95).

Saglia further argues that it was Boabdil’s tears that retain a permanent aura of the exotic, and this “because they were removed from their original meaning and import, and refashioned into vehicles for ideological concerns proper to British Romantic-period culture” (193). Byron’s *Don Juan*, for instance, recuperates the Arab King’s tears in such a way as to draw attention to its textual “polyphony and hybridity,” on the one hand, and to dramatize the ineluctable “miscegenation of cultures, the impossibility of separating Europe and Africa, Christianity and Islam or East and West,” on the other (204). Re-coded as elusive, “free-floating signifiers” within British Romantic tropology, Boabdil’s tears also serve to deflate “the excess of virility proper to clichéd Eastern sultans” (212).

It is precisely the image of the lachrymose Arab King that took hold of Rushdie’s imagination. The following is a synopsis of the Boabdil story as it is known in popular historical accounts and also as told to young Abraham (Moraes’s father) by

Mr. Moshe Cohen, the Cochin Jewish community pundit:

Thus Abraham learned that, in January 1492, while Christopher Columbus watched in wonderment and contempt, the Sultan Boabdil of Granada had surrendered the keys to the fortress-palace of the Alhambra, last and greatest of all the Moors' fortifications, to the all-conquering Catholic Kings Fernando and Isabella, giving up his principality without so much as a battle. He departed into exile with his mother and retainers, bringing to a close the centuries of Moorish Spain; and reining in his horse upon the Hill of Tears he turned to look for one last time upon his loss, upon the palace and fertile plains and all the concluded glory of al-Andalus . . . at which sight the Sultan sighed, and hotly wept—whereupon his mother, the terrifying Ayxa the Virtuous, sneered at his grief. [. . .] *Well may you weep like a woman for what you could not defend like a man*, she taunted him: meaning of course the opposite. (79-80; emphasis in original)

Curiously, the moment that Abraham heaves a sigh at “the mournful weight of Boabdil’s coming-to-an-end” (80) is also the moment that his asthma sets in, a fatal ailment he bequeaths to his son Moraes.

While pointing to a common motif in Western-Andalusian aesthetics, Boabdil’s sigh in Rushdie’s narrative also indexes the intersection of gender and national politics. In Boabdil’s resignation to the conquering Catholic Monarchs (an uncanny echo of Rushdie’s own resignation when he converted to Islam), Rushdie finds a fit anti-fundamentalist figure “in whom all the cultures flowed and [who] therefore was unable to take absolutist views” (Reder 156). The Arab King’s effeminate sensibility, as suggested by his tears, and his mother’s more assertive masculinity, as suggested by

her reproachful words—“*Well may you weep like a woman for what you could not defend like a man*” (80)—<sup>79</sup> correlate metaphorically with Rushdie’s elaborate imaginings of India as a nation of formidable matriarchs. As such the Arab King fulfils a twofold function in the narrative: first, he helps equate the fable of a genetic connection between him and the protagonist (through their shared nickname *el-zogoiby*, the Unlucky) with the embedded historical subtext of the post-Andalusian Arab-Jewish diaspora; second, he represents a postexotic modern figure whose effeteness mediates the inscription of a maternal Indian national imaginary, all the while contesting the trite stereotype of the despotic Arab sultan in Orientalist writings.

*The Moor’s Last Sigh* re-imagines India’s national identity across gender, racial, and religious boundaries. The trope of the weeping Arab King is useful in this respect because it allows Rushdie to negotiate what Alexandra W. Schultheis identifies as two competing metaphors of national identity: the Western patriarchal metaphor of the nation as a family, on the one hand, and the metaphor of Mother India so entrenched in Indian popular culture, on the other (571-72). Exploring both traditions, Rushdie also underlines their limits. Simultaneously reversing the traditional images of aggressive Oriental sultans and re-inscribing the Indian idea of the nation as a *materfamilias*, Rushdie’s narrative marshals a multigenerational gallery of indomitable matriarchs which starts with the Dowager Queen Aisha (or Ayxa, Boabdil’s mother), through Epifania Menezes and Flory Zogoiby, and ends with none other than Aurora da Gama, Moraes’s mother and India’s arch-artist.

The classic patriarchal notion of *paterfamilias* in the European metanarrative of the nation is revised in terms of an equally assertive female typology. “Motherness,” Moraes insists, “is a big idea in India, maybe our biggest: the land as mother, the

mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet” (*MLS* 137). The release and immediate success of the film *Mother India* (1957) to which Moraes alludes has made the image of the self-sacrificing, relentlessly struggling mother perhaps the most iconoclastic embodiment of the nation in India’s popular culture.<sup>80</sup> Since the “all-conquering movie *Mother India*,” Moraes explains, “[n]obody [has] ever made a movie called *Father India*.” Even the much-acclaimed 1987 film *Mr. India* remains in Moraes’s eyes no more than “a trashy extravaganza, as worthless in its gaudy colours as the old Nargis mother-vehicle [the actress playing Radha in *Mother India*] was somber and worthy.” The only redeeming feature of the belated movie, Moraes continues sarcastically, was perhaps that it “unintentionally” depicted to its public an Indian version of a “National Father” through its villain character, Mogambo, whose name evokes the image of an African tribal chieftain spearheading a barbarian invasion on Mother India. As for the movie’s “gimcrack hero,” Moraes finds him no better than the rest of India’s otherwise unremarkable men, such as Moraes himself and his father, whose life stories are not worthy or impressive enough to make a movie script (168-69).

If Moraes finds the idea of “Father India” unsuitable for cinematic adaptation, it is because the majority of the male role models available to him are woefully flawed. They are disillusioned politicians-cum-artists (Francisco and Camoens da Gama), emasculated husbands (Abraham Zogoiby), and incorrigible hanky-panky addicts (Aires da Gama). Even Nehru, the heir of Gandhi’s spiritual charisma and the undisputed hero of the Indian independence movement, is often criticized for the unbecomingness of his alleged intimacy with Viceroy Mountbatten’s wife. In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, and according to Moraes’s speculations, both Edwina Mountbatten

and Aurora Zogoiby secretly vie against each other for the Pundit's affection, until Aurora decides to expose the Prime Minister's liaison with the Vicereine at the government award ceremony held in recognition of her artistic achievements. The regenerative female accomplishments (particularly Aurora's) in re-imagining a national culture and building a democratic secular state seem to offset the impotent paternalism of India's political leadership (National Congress politicians and Hindu nationalist leaders) as well as its degenerate entrepreneurial class (Abraham Zogoiby).

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Moorishness is an index for racial and cultural hybridity. The story behind Moraes's mongrel descent travels as far back in time as Arab Spain and then re-weaves its way into the narrative as a semi-legendary family secret redolent of treachery, theft, and tainted kinship. No sooner does Flory Zogoiby, Moraes's paternal grandmother, know about the anticipated marriage between Aurora da Gama and her son Abraham, than she becomes irate about the unacceptability of Cochin Jews marrying "outside the community," all the while drawing on her xenophobically myopic knowledge of the history of "the White Jews in India" (70) who presumably prospered thanks to their devotion to the spice trade ever since they set foot on Indian soil around 72 B.C. Flory is distraught, not because Aurora is a "Christy," but because she is a da Gama, the descendant of the Zogoiby's Portuguese business competitors in the Cochin spice trade:

"A Christy wasn't bad enough, you had to pick the very worst of the bunch," Flory was muttering. But her gaze was still far away in the past, fixed upon Jewish cashews and areca-nuts and jack-fruit trees, upon the ancient waving fields of Jewish oilseed rape, the gathering of Jewish cardamoms, for had these not been the basis of the community's prosperity? "Now these come-latelies

steal our business,” she mumbled. “And proud of being bastards and all. Fitz-Vasco-da-Gamas! No better than a bunch of Moors.” (71)

Moreover, it was the Portuguese merchants who had once and forever lured her husband, Solomon Castile the local synagogue caretaker, “away in search of the golden streets,” leaving her “spouseless” with her seven-year-old Abraham to whom she inevitably gave her own family name, Zogoiby (75). Solomon Castile’s spectre, like that of Boabdil on Aurora’s canvases later in the novel, will appear in the “metamorphic tiles” of the synagogue, at times as a fortune-seeking Sinbad or an Oriental sultan wallowing in the luxury of his eunuch-populated harems, and yet at others as a forlorn “skinny mendicant” (76).

Setting straight his mother’s record, Abraham confronts her with the truth behind the four-and-a-half-century-old family heirlooms which she keeps hidden in a wooden chest by the synagogue altar:

And upon this phantasm of a turban, the family legend went, hung age-dulled chains of solid gold, and dangling off these chains were emeralds so large and green that they looked like toys. *It was four and a half centuries old, the last crown to fall from the head of the last prince of al-Andalus; nothing less than the crown of Granada, as worn by Abu Abdallah, last of the Nasrids, known as “Boabdil.”* (79; emphasis in original)

A “dark green turban,” a “silver dagger,” and a tattered parchment notebook in Spanish script by an anonymous hand—such are the contents of the Zogoibys’ hidden treasure trove. As Abraham unearths the long-kept and concealed origins of the family’s enshrined regal relics, he also unfolds what has until now been a cryptic version of the Zogoiby family history, one that traces its ancestry back to the expulsion of the Jews

from Spain after the conquest of Granada in 1492 by the Catholic Monarchs. The Andalusian valuables in Flory's wooden box are soon revealed to be the treasure which a Jewish mistress of Boabdil's had purloined before she set sail for India carrying in her belly the king's illegitimate male offspring of whom Abraham is presumably the descendant (82). Challenging his mother's unfounded fears for "*the purity of our race*," Abraham lays bare the already tainted blood of the Zogoiby lineage: "Mother, who is worse? My Aurora who does not hide the Vasco connection, but takes delight; or myself, born of the fat old Moor of Granada's last sighs in the arms of his thieving mistress—Boabdil's bastard Jew?" (82-83; emphasis in original).

With a Sternean ironic twist, however, Moraes (and Rushdie by extension) throws into question the reliability of the abovementioned version of the Moor story by reminding his readers that it is only one of many other versions, versions that may be even "stranger" than the first but "of the truth of [which] there can be no doubt whatsoever" (85). All "this Moor-stuff, this Granada-yada," as Flory's own version of the story has it, may be an instance of mythomaniac self-aggrandizement typical of Indian orature, "a fairy tale of the sort we folks love to tell ourselves about ourselves," or simply a Jewish-Indian cock-and-bull *masala* (85). After acknowledging his alleged connection to the Nasrid king to be little more than an example of that long-winded "Indian talent for self-regeneration" (*IH* 16), Moraes's claim that the authenticity of the tale does not lie in what it tells but rather in the telling itself simply exhausts one's ability to choose tales other than his. "And so for the yarn of the Moor: If I were forced to choose between logic and childhood memory, between head and heart, then sure; in spite of all the foregoing, *I'd go along with the tale*" (85-86; emphasis added). Just as Moraes is goaded into Vasco Miranda's Alhambra tower later in the novel, so the

reader is now manoeuvred into Moraes's narrative cavalcade.<sup>81</sup> And against the gloomy background of the Second World War, the Hindu-Muslim conflict over Mohammed Jinnah's partition project, and the arrests of Congress leaders by British officials—against these disturbing “high affairs of state,” Moraes Zogoiby insists that his “love story” be told (87). For like India's other midnight child, Saleem Sinai, who finds himself “mysteriously handcuffed to history” (*MC* 9), Moraes finds history too heavy a burden for him to carry for long on his own: its “ghosts” and “distant shadows” need to be told, exorcized and “be done with” (*MLS* 11), or else they will keep nibbling away at the edges of his soul.<sup>82</sup>

From a historiographical perspective, Rushdie's incorporation of the story of the weeping Boabdil within that of an Indian-Shandyan, “cross-breed” anti-hero empties the Granadan mythos both of its Romantic sentimentality and exotic grandiosity (5). The oft-exotified tale of that “last sigh for a lost world” (4) is reduced from a semi-historical troping on the Jewish-Indian diaspora to the hereditary asthmatic gasp of “a Jewholic-anonymous,” as Moraes likes to describe himself (104). Typical of Rushdie's talent for narrative deflation, the historical unexpectedly collapses into the physiological. More important, however, is that Rushdie weaves the Granadan leitmotif into the fabric of his Indian yarn in such a way as to single out a category of self-serving artists who market the fashionable idea of the hybrid based on their entitlement to boundless creativity and unbridled freedom in the pursuit of their art. Vasco Miranda is one such artist. A second-rate Goan painter striving beneath Aurora's artistic shadow and tormented by his unrequited love for her, Vasco eventually manages to bring himself under her protective wing, but he is soon cast out of the Zogoiby household because of the obscenity of a portrait which Abraham has

commissioned him to draw of the second-time pregnant Aurora. Originally, the “Aurora Portrait” displays the beautiful mother sitting cross-legged on a gigantic lizard with an invisible child suckling at her exposed breast. Offended not only by the explicit indecency of the portrait but also by the absence from it of his first-born daughter, Abraham peremptorily gives Vasco Miranda his marching orders. Humiliated but ever enamored, Vasco retreats to his studio where he spends three days working on the same canvas layering over it, palimpsest-fashion, “an equestrian portrait of the artist [Vasco himself] in Arab attire” and giving it the long and corny title, “*The Artist as Boabdil, the Unlucky (el-Zogoiby), Last Sultan of Granada, Seen Departing from the Alhambra [ . . . ]. Or The Moor’s Last Sigh*” (161-60). Once put up for sale, Vasco’s “lachrymose self-portrait *en arabe*” (180) meets with unprecedented commercial success, catapulting his fame to celebrity status and making him “the darling of international moneyed establishment” without whose murals “no new hotel lobby or airport terminal was complete” (159).

The lucrative success of Vasco Miranda’s “airport art” (253), despite his painful awareness of its aesthetic inferiority to Aurora’s, allegorizes the proliferation of underground corporations that contravene the business regulations the government has put in place in its effort to reconstruct the country’s infrastructure after independence. The Khazana Bank International (KBI), for instance, “the first financial institution from the Third World to rival the great Western banks in terms of assets and transactions” (334), is one such corporation. Not only does it monitor “shadow accounts” belonging to the world’s “most-dangerous” organizations, but it is also allegedly involved in uranium-enrichment projects in collaboration with “oil-rich countries and their ideological allies” (335). Moreover, Abraham Zogoiby’s “Siodi” (Cashondeliveri)

company and talcum powder business are used as mere cover-ups, as legal layers over his other underhanded and more lucrative dealings in narcotics, arms, and even in the KBI's secret scheme of manufacturing "the so-called Islamic bomb" (341; 181-85; 250-51; 332; 335). Moraes sadly relates that his father was even involved in human trafficking, procuring (literally buying) forsaken temple girls to Mogambo-like Muslim Mafiosi, gangsters whom he deployed as instruments of coercion and intimidation in his daily transactions with non-cooperating business partners. Disillusioned, Moraes comes to see the New Bombay (and all India by extension) as a simulacral city succumbing to an invisible, greed-driven entrepreneurial class and mammon-minded intellectual élite:<sup>83</sup>

This city itself, perhaps the whole country, was a palimpsest, Under World beneath Over World, black market beneath white; when the whole life was like this, when an invisible reality moved phantomwise beneath a visible fiction, subverting all its meanings, how then could Abraham's career have been any different? How could any of us have escaped the deadly layering? How, trapped as we were in the hundred per cent fakery of the real, in the fancy-dress, weeping-Arab kitsch of the superficial, could we have been penetrated to the full, sensual truth of the lost mother below? How could we have lived authentic lives? How could we have failed to be grotesque? (184-85)

Vasco's Indo-European hybrid art soon develops into profit-oriented, self-serving exoticism. His Western-style artistic career, his "spiced-up rehash of the European surrealists [. . .] for which the owners of public buildings would pay truly surrealist sums" (148), shows the extent to which the so-called hybridity art can be compromised by a consumer-based cultural market. As Moraes explains, had it not been for the

“huge foreign-currency fortune” that Vasco amassed while promoting his career in cities like New York and Lisbon, he would not have been able to build his Alhambra-like “hilltop folly” in Benengeli, Spain (253).

It is no wonder that he chooses Benengeli to lead an expatriate’s life cloistered behind the walls of his mock-Andalusian fortress; for the Spanish city, as Rushdie describes it, is a small-scale megalopolis unto itself, where the multicultural heritage of Andalusia is being submerged by the consumerism of commodity culture. As Moraes meanders through the thoroughfares of Benengeli in search of Vasco’s dwelling, Rushdie paints a distressing picture where an Andalusian setting is gradually receding before the global reach of capitalist flows and massive demographic movements:

[ . . . ] I made my way down the little lane and found myself in a most un-Spanish thoroughfare, a “pedestrianised” street full of non-Spaniards [ . . . ]. This thoroughfare, which, as I would discover, was known by the locals as the Street of Parasites, was flanked by a large number of expensive boutiques—Gucci, Hermès, Aquascutum, Cardin, Paloma Picasso—and also by eating-places ranging from Scandinavian meatball-vendors to a Stars-and-Stripes-liveried Chicago Rib Shack. I stood in the midst of a crowd that pushed past me in both directions, ignoring my presence completely in the manner of city-dwellers rather than village folk. I heard people speaking English, American, French, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and what might have been either Dutch or Afrikaans. But these were no visitors; they carried no cameras, and behaved as people do on their own territory. This denatured part of Benengeli had become theirs. There was not a single Spaniard to be seen. “Perhaps these expatriates are the new Moors,” I thought. (390)

In this contemporary Spain, Cantor suggests, Moraes “encounters a strange simulacrum of the Moorish regime, a hollow echo of its genuine multiculturalism” (333). The city’s Moorish past is buried under “a world of falsely universal brand names, epitomized by the fast-food chains that spring everywhere and belong nowhere” (Cantor 334). And the “zombification of the characters on the postnational street,” as Moss puts it, indicates the devaluation of cultural and historical assets and the onset of a neo-*Reconquista* by the modern Moors of the fashion industry (135).

The line that separates multiculturalism and consumerism is perhaps as thin as that which separates progressive modernity and mere novelty. In Rushdie’s works (both fictional and non-fictional), the modernization of post-Independence India is problematically linked to the secularization of religious thought referred to earlier in this chapter.<sup>84</sup> In *The Moor’s Last Sigh* Jawaharlal Nehru becomes the target of Rushdie’s political satire, as the Indian punditji’s modernistic urban reforms prove less progressive than disruptive. At Cabral Island, the pro-Nehru idealist Francisco da Gama, Moraes’s great grandfather and India’s renowned “patron of the arts,” seeks a young Frenchman’s “architectural genius” to build what Epifania, the Anglophile, Macaulay minutewoman, calls two “madhouses” set in the resplendent gardens of his otherwise magnificent, traditional-style mansion. The outcome is obviously an outrageously alien combination of sharp angles, awkward patterns, and mismatched color motifs:

And what crazy structures they turned out to be!—The one a strange angular slabby affair in which the garden penetrated the interior space so thoroughly that it was often hard to say whether one was in or out of doors, and the furniture looked like something made for a hospital or a geometry class, you

couldn't sit on it without bumping into some pointy corner; the other wood and paper house of cards [. . .] a flimsy fire-trap whose walls were sliding parchment screens, and in whose rooms one was not supposed to sit, but kneel [. . .]. (15-16)

Francisco's young architect is evidently Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret), the famous French-Swiss architect commissioned by the Congress government to reconstruct the city of Chandigarh in a way that reflects a Nehruvian vision of a modern, secular India, an India "unfettered by the traditions of the past . . . an expression of the nation's faith in the future" (qtd. in Metcalf and Metcalf 235). Nehru's reliance on the formal purism of LeCorbusier's International Style to recreate a progressive India unshackled by superstition and religious icons was often criticized "for its disregard of Indian conditions and India's architectural heritage. Too sprawling, too forbidding in its monumentality, the city [Chandigarh] appeared remote from the realities of Indian life" (237). Francisco's architectural extravaganza symbolically holds up to ridicule Nehru's socialist idealism and its failure to implement a genuine Indian *gestalt* where India's diverse cultures and histories can be organized into a seamless whole.

Rushdie's satirical treatment of Nehru's city planning projects is inspired by a well-known case in Arab-Spanish architectural history. After the Christian conquest of Cordoba in 1236, the city's Great Mosque, which the successive Umayyad caliphs built in stages throughout two centuries (785-988), was transformed into a Renaissance-style Christian cathedral. Early in the fifteenth century, a *coro* (nave) was installed in the middle of the mosque supposedly to reinforce its structure. And when King Charles V of Spain visited the site guided by the proud Christian clergy, he could express but utter dismay and regret at the outcome of what he himself had commissioned: "You have

built here what you, or anyone else, might have built anywhere; to do so you have destroyed what was unique in the World.” The king’s rebuke, as notorious as that of King Boabdil’s mother, remains “one of the most crushing royal rebukes on matters architectural ever delivered” (Fletcher 2-3). Even Moraes at one point discontentedly compares his hybrid identity to “*a Catholicized Córdoba mosque [. . .]. A piece of Eastern architecture with a Baroque cathedral stuck in the middle of it*” (387; emphasis in original).

Although architectural history clearly suggests that the addition of a cathedral nave was less an embellishment than a distortion,<sup>85</sup> one must nevertheless remember that the Great Mosque of Cordoba was originally constructed on top of a pre-existing Christian church, in the same way that the Dome of the Rock, for instance, was built on top of Temple Mount in Jerusalem during the 690s (Hourani, *History* 28), or that the Great Mosque of Damascus was also erected “with the bits and pieces of a Roman temple and a Christian church” (Menocal, *Ornament* 20). While such historical-architectural layerings indicate the inevitable hybridity, the intertwining of histories and national narratives, religious and political single-mindedness all too often turns them into bloodstained sites of inter-communal strife. The Babri Masjid massacre in 1992 to which Rushdie refers in the novel after Moraes joins Raman Fielding’s underground terrorist league shows how disputes over holy sites upon which different layers of religious symbols have been erected may lead to bloody and long-lasting enmities.

Just as the *Reconquista* bishops hastened to make a religious and political statement by catholicizing the Mosque of Cordoba four and a half centuries before, so Nehru wanted to make a similar statement by prematurely modernizing and

secularizing India; and both in their haste failed to answer the question that the narrator of *The Satanic Verses* repeatedly asks, “How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?” (8) Instead of gradually infusing healthy modernity into the still-recovering body of post-British India, and while failing to meet the more pressing needs of the nation’s indigent areas, the new government rushed to create modern edifices and national emblems that stand as incongruously and awkwardly as the erected *coro* in the Cordoban mosque. A great architect disregards neither the *genius loci* (space) nor the historical context (time) of his designs (Docherty, “Introduction” 265); likewise, the project of modernity must disregard neither the tradition from which it seeks to depart nor the collective cultural memory it seeks to remap.

Along the same lines, if one fixates on the putative virtues of being a cultural hybrid, on that fashionable “myth of *excess* of belongings,” one ends up losing the sense of direction and purpose enabled by firm grounding in the tradition one seeks to revise (Aijaz Ahmad 127; emphasis in original). That a serious engagement with Islam *from within*—that is, from within its constitutive logic and tradition—has been absent in postcolonial discussions, as Majid has noted, is perhaps one of the reasons why stereotypes about it are still rampant. Moreover, such a fixation eventually de-historicizes the socio-political and economic specificities of other cultural formations in different locations as well. Current incantations about cultural hybridity lift it from its geo-political context, diminish its contestatory thrust, and thus reduce it to what Bhabha calls a mere “exoticism of multiculturalism” where the politics of difference cedes the ground to a poetics of diversity (38).<sup>86</sup>

Rushdie is profoundly aware of the ways in which de-historicized notions of

cultural hybridity may falter as modalities of self-identification and tropes of resistance. Despite his perceived post-9/11 pro-West allegiances, Rushdie remains nevertheless unequivocal in his dismissal of the Western, rightwing anti-Evil rhetoric. Such rhetoric, he avers, is misleadingly abstruse and stereotypically divisive, precisely because it “dehistoricizes these events [9/11 attacks], depoliticizes, and even depersonalizes them”; and by so doing, it becomes a form of fundamentalism unto itself (*Step* 377). Likewise, I want to argue, a postcolonial hybridity (be it an art form or a critical discourse) that ceases to be sensitive to the social totalities and political complexities that determine its production and circulation either becomes an ineffective, sealed-off form of idealism or renders itself vulnerable to the very fundamentalism it seeks to transcend. As Dohra Ahmad argues, “hybridity-based art will inevitably function according to the rules of a world in which fundamentalisms still dominate. Upon entering the public sphere, even a work of art that intends to contain multiplicitous and provisional meaning opens itself to the possibility of reductive reading” (12). Because it carries within it elements of the dominant culture—albeit for subversive purposes, as Bhabha defines it—the hybrid is likely to be recuperated and absorbed by that very culture (13). Moreover, because it idealizes the ambivalent plurality of its enunciative space, the discourse of hybridity often obfuscates what Edward Said describes as “the actual *affiliations* that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force, on the other” (*Reflections* 119). The exclusionary “cult of expertise and professionalism” encouraged by the academic institution today and the all-inclusive cult of hybridity in postcolonial thought are simply two sides of the same idealist coin (119). While academic and institutional

disciplinarity generates compartmentalized fields of knowledge production by setting the boundaries of intellectual enquiry, the postcolonial discourse of hybridity much too often puts out of its ken and glosses over the underlying sites of social hierarchies and networks of uneven power relations precisely by amplifying the range of its cross-cultural purview.<sup>87</sup>

The recuperation of the hybrid by the dominant discourse is nowhere better illustrated than in one of the novel's remarkable ironies of situation where Aurora's "dance *against* the gods" at the annual Hindu carnival is gleefully interpreted by the celebrants as her worshiping of their elephant-headed god (315; emphasis added). A symbolic enactment of her subversive aesthetics though it may be, Aurora's mock dance does not ward off the tidal wave of Hindu nationalism which the festival is intended to celebrate (Coetzee 13). Unable to distinguish the dancer from the dance, however, fundamentalism immediately absorbs both. (Aurora dies on a hilltop at the festival after she has danced out her last.) Aurora's visions of a hybrid and secular India seem to underestimate the power of Indian communalism to contain and recycle them for self-motivated political purposes, in the same way that Rushdie's ideals of artistic freedom and multicultural diversity as developed in *The Satanic Verses* seemed to have underestimated their potential misinterpretation by Muslim fundamentalism (D. Ahmad 13). This is the lesson Rushdie draws from the fatwa experience and which he, in my view, tries to articulate in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. As he put it in a 1996 interview, "some of the values that I've always most cared about, the values of pluralism and multiplicity and being many things and not being narrow, not defining yourself or your culture narrowly [. . .] can also lead to great weakness of purpose":

So that one way of interpreting the story we were talking about, the story of the

fall of Granada, is that here is this wonderful, pluralist, civilized culture. When it's faced with this narrow spectrum, obsessive, very focused fundamentalist attack, it disintegrates, gives up without a fight, doesn't have a chance. And I think if these are the ideas that we care about—freedom, tolerance, living side by side with difference and so on—we must also understand how they can create weakness, and therefore, you know, by understanding that, may give us a way of guarding against that attack, that intolerant, narrow spectrum, vicious attack. (Reder 207)

Rushdie warns against overconfidence in the parodic capacity of the hybrid as well as in the purported limitlessness of artistic freedom. The following passage, written shortly after the 9/11 tragedy, proves the one quoted above is anything but prophetic:

The problem of limits is made awkward for artists and writers, including myself, by our own adherence to, and insistence upon, a no-limits position in our own work. The frontierlessness of art has been and remains our heady ideology. [. . .] And now, in the aftermath of horror, of the iconoclastically transgressive image-making of the terrorists, do artists and writers still have the right to insist on the supreme, unfettered freedoms of art? Is it time, instead of endlessly pushing the envelope, stepping into forbidden territory, and generally causing trouble, to start discovering what frontiers might be necessary to art, rather than an affront to it? (*Step 379*)

Not that Rushdie is preaching artistic parochialism, but his main concern is that we are now living in an era where borderlines (geo-political, religious, national, racial, and otherwise) are being re-drawn, and it is the responsibility of the artist/intellectual to keep them in sight all the while trying to re-imagine adequate means of negotiating

them.

Rushdie's treatment of the myth of hybridity as the opposite version of the myth of authenticity is manifest in Aurora's Moor paintings.<sup>88</sup> Superimposing public commentary with personal experience, Aurora's paintings are divided into three phases: first, those which she painted between Moraes's birth and Indira Gandhi's electoral defeat and which are defined by their colourful, optimistic variations upon the Boabdil story (1957-77); second, those which have established her as India's uncontested artistic voice (1977-81) but which are also marked by a sense of loss and despair; and last, "'the dark Moors,' those pictures of exile and terror," in which the Arab King becomes for the first and last time her primary subject matter (1981-87) (*MLS* 218). Aurora's treatment of the Granadan theme in these works stands in stark contrast to that of Vasco Miranda's. While Vasco's portrayal of the tearfully departing Arab King exudes Romantic sentimentality and exotic nostalgia, Aurora's suggests an expressionistic-minimalist encapsulation of all the sorrow evoked by Boabdil's eviction from his cherished Alhambra palace (218).

Like her pro-Nehru father, Aurora favours an Indian secular democracy, where national identity is defined, not by religious faith, but rather by a shared belief in cultural pluralism, freedom of expression, and collective responsibility. Even as a child, India's deities have little room in her imagination. Once, while being grounded for having pilfered her grandmother's elephant-goddesses, little Aurora draws her first painting—a mural in which a "hyper-abundance of imagery" suggests Mother India but from which God "or indeed any other representation of any other divinity" is conspicuously absent (60). Aurora's "early Moors" pictures similarly reflect a sense of hope for a secular, multicultural India as it ushers in the second half of the millennium.

They display not an ““Authorised Version but Aurorised Version”” of a multicultural India, a painterly amalgam of “Mughal splendours” and “Spanish building’s Moorish grace,” where The Alhambra palace is mapped over Malabar Hill, Granada over Bombay (225-26). Aurora’s “Mooristan” is not an Andalusian sanctuary for Jews, Muslims and Christians only, but a “land-sea-scape” (227) inhabited by humans, ghosts, folktale heroes and sea creatures (226). Her vision of a secular *Indialusia*<sup>89</sup> is prompted by a desire to paint Andalusia’s *convivencia* into India’s pluralism, “to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation.” Indeed, “she was using Arab Spain to re-imagine India” (227).

Aurora Zogoiby was seeking to paint a golden age. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains crowded into her paint-Boabdil’s fancy-dress balls, and the Sultan himself was represented less and less naturalistically, appearing more and more often as a masked, particoloured harlequin, a patchwork quilt of a man; or, as his old skin dropped from him chrysalis-fashion, standing revealed as a glorious butterfly, whose wings were a miraculous composite of all the colours in the world. (227)

Pre-Inquisition Andalusia is Aurora’s exemplary model for a secular, multicultural India.

Soon after the debacle of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency Rule, Aurora’s Moor paintings enter their second phase. Still interfacing personal angst with public commentary, Aurora’s hybrid art now grows forebodingly nebulous, apocalyptic, but always agonizingly personal. More precisely, it interweaves her sense of loss (the death of her eldest daughter, Ina) with her “Cassandran fears for the nation, her fierce grief at the sourness of what had once, at least in an India of dreams, been sweet as

sugar-cane juice” (236). In their second phase, and precisely after Moraes abandons his mother and intends to pose instead for her rival Uma Sarasvati, an up-and-coming sculptor and his scheming girlfriend, the Moor paintings become dismal, black and white sketches, with Boabdil constantly lurking in the background more as Moraes’s doppelgänger than his royal progenitor. Aurora’s hybrid paintings become increasingly characterized by their double-exposure technique where the Moor is a faint figure eerily hovering over her canvases, more a figure of haunting than of longing. The last Nasrid Arab ruler of Granada is no longer the exotically sentimental Sultan with his white charger, bejeweled turban and ever melancholy demeanour as originally depicted by European romancers and as evoked by Vasco Miranda’s popular murals, but rather a wraith “crossing the frontier between the metaphors of art and the observable facts of everyday life” (239). Born of Aurora’s “maternal jealousy” and of her disillusionment in Mrs. Gandhi’s ineffectual rule (247), the Arab Sultan is no longer the “particoloured harlequin” of her earlier and optimistically patriotic phase, but the harbinger of apocalyptic visions.

Aurora’s last Moor paintings draw such visions to their extreme conclusion, thus spelling her own failure to bring any real change to the India she depicts on her canvases. Not only do they give expression to her agony over the departure of her son and the death of her older daughter, Mynah, but they also reflect “the defeat of the pluralist philosophy” she has envisioned for India throughout her career (272). This is the period when Moraes is mistakenly imprisoned in the ghastly Bombay Central dungeons for the suspected murder of Uma Sarasvati and then bailed out by Raman Fielding. The latter is an anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, pro-caste, pro-sati Hindu nationalist whom Rushdie models after Bal Thackeray, notorious leader of the

ultraright Shiv Sena Party and responsible for the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 (298-99). Dismayed by the grotesqueries of Hindu revivalist politics, and more so by her own son's involvement in them,<sup>90</sup> Aurora begins the last phase of her Moor paintings, also referred to as the "dark Moors" series. After the tragedy of Operation Bluestar in Amritsar, leading to the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi (1984) and to reprisal killings between Hindus and Sikhs,<sup>91</sup> and with the growing popularity of Fielding's/Thackeray's "Maharashtra-for-Maharashtrians" sectarian platform, Aurora's final Moor paintings begin to exhibit a postmodern sense of disintegration and fragmentation:

Aurora had apparently decided that the ideas of impurity, cultural admixture and *mélange* which had been, for most of her creative life, the closest things she had found to a notion of the Good, were in fact capable of distortion, and contained a potential for darkness as well as for light. [. . .] This "black Moor" [. . .] became a haunted figure, fluttered about by phantoms of his past which tormented him though he cowered and bid them begone. Then slowly he grew phantomlike himself, [. . .] was robbed of his lozenges and jewels and the last vestiges of his glory; obliged to become a soldier in some petty warlord's army [. . .], reduced to mercenary status where once he had been a king, he rapidly became a composite being as pitiful and anonymous as those amongst whom he moved. Garbage piled up, and buried him. (303)

What Saleem Sinai calls "the chutnification of history" in *Midnight's Children* has become Aurora's "junkyard collage" in *The Moor's Last Sigh* (315).<sup>92</sup> The idea of the hybrid as the central metaphor of her mythic imaginings of the nation soon dissolves into deep-sunken phantasmagoria, where the Andalusian king loses "his metaphorical

rôle as a unifier of opposites, as standard-bearer of pluralism.” No longer “a glorious butterfly” (227), Boabdil the Unfortunate is now a post-exotic “semi-allegorical figure of decay” (303).

The apocalyptic dimensions of Aurora’s late style echo Rushdie’s concerns about idealized conceptions of cultural hybridity. In many respects, Aurora’s Moorish paintings may be deemed a failure, for, despite their genuine structure of feeling, they do not resonate with, much less affect, the everyday realities of India’s oppressed. Even when the artistic zeal of young Aurora leads her one day in 1946 to venture into Bombay’s favelas in order to “capture history in charcoal” during one of “the great naval and landlubber strikes,” she does so from the safety of her “American motor car” with its “gold-and-green curtains” over “the rear windscreen and back windows” (129). And when she is rebuffed by the strikers as “a questionable figure” from the city’s wealthy suburbia, she returns disguised in “a cheap floral-print dress from Crawford Market” better to mingle with her subjects (130). And mingle she does, just as her mock dance later allows her to mingle with the jubilant crowd at the Hindu fiesta. “My mother always possessed the occult power of making herself invisible in the pursuit of her work,” Moraes confirms admiringly. Nonetheless, her knack for invisibility exposes neither the “invisible reality” of her husband’s shady businesses and his clandestine blue-collar workforce nor Raman Fielding’s secret political machinations (184). Eventually, when her “clearly subversive, clearly pro-strike” sketches are exhibited (131), neither the British authority nor indeed any of the strikers seem to care enough to notice them. Neglected by both the oppressor and the oppressed, Aurora’s sketches linger only temporarily for the predilection of select fellow artists and highbrow intellectuals.

Although unmotivated by any political self-interest, Aurora's ivory-towered, late-style art is a failure, precisely because its variations on the Andalusian theme do not foreground realistically enough the plight of India's masses. Because of her irredeemable penchant for the "Epico-Mythico-Tragico-Comico-Super-Sexy-High-Masala-Art" (148-49), as Vasco Miranda sardonically puts it, Aurora's art keeps her severed from the India of the overcrowded, impoverished quarters inhabited by her own servants (193-94), of the stinking prison cells controlled by Fielding's "neo-Stalinist" Hindustani regime (231; 285-90), and of the underworld businesses run by Abraham Zogoiby and his Muslim mafia (295). Instead of continually absorbing this kind of India and then painting it into real existence, old Aurora reverts to the theme of an Indian mythopoeia drenched in the fantasy of an Andalusian-style multicultural utopia. Rather than continuing to rub shoulders with India's downtrodden and to fight against its caste hierarchies and class injustices, she decides to surround herself with a coterie of Bombay's sophisticated and upper-class dilettantes who are primarily known as "the Doctor, the Lady Doctor, the Radiologist, the Journalist, the Professor, the Sarangi Player, the Playwright, the Printer, the Curator, the Jazz Singer, the Lawyer, and the Accountant" (202).

The esoteric loftiness of Aurora's late work may be associated with what many secular left critics have consistently identified as a disconcerting metropolitan elitism in Rushdie's fiction. Aijaz Ahmad, for instance, situates Rushdie and his early novels (*Grimus*, *Shame*, and *Midnight's Children*) within "an ideological location which makes it possible for [him, i.e., Rushdie] to partake, equally, of the postmodernist moment and the counter-canon of the 'Third World Literature'" in Euro-American academies (125). Rushdie's modernist-postmodernist thematization of Third World

concerns (postcoloniality, nation-building, modernity, tradition, religion, patriarchy, oppression, etc.) blankets his own “ideological moorings in the High Culture of the modern metropolitan bourgeoisie.” Moreover, Ahmad finds Rushdie’s work, “right up to *The Satanic Verses*” and especially in *Shame*, characterized by a postmodernist commitment to the “fragmentariness of experience,” which consequently forecloses the “realist option” and leaves out actual experiences lived by real people under concrete conditions (138-39). Whether or not these presumably neglected experiences will be revisited by Rushdie, Ahmad admits, can be “[found] out only from later work” (139).

My reading of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* parts company with Ahmad’s argument, noting that the cultural universalism which he identifies as the mark of Rushdie’s indebtedness to the High Modernism of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* (128) is re-inscribed within the expansive paradigm of postmodern realism. By this I mean the ways in which Rushdie’s postmodern aesthetics is inextricably tied to historicist representations of social reality.<sup>93</sup> In *Shame*, as well as in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, “History,” to use Simon During’s apt phrase, “is never derealized” or abstracted into postmodern narrative virtuosity (461). After *The Satanic Verses* and “the intimate demonstration [he has] had of the power of religion for evil” (Reder 159), Rushdie is unmistakably more cognizant of, more attuned to, the political implications of his literary productions, on the one hand, and the limitations of the oppositional politics of postmodern parody and postcolonial hybridity, on the other.<sup>94</sup> As Laura Moss notes, the difference between *Midnight’s Children* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh* is that the latter parodies the magic realism of the former, and “the parody is juxtaposed with an expansion of political awareness in the increased politicization of the narrative; the increased exposure of corruption in corporate India; the increased depiction of the

devastation wrought by religious fundamentalism in Bombay, and the increased hopelessness of secular pluralism” (122-23).<sup>95</sup> As the novel demonstrates, an obsessive and abstract preoccupation with artistic multiplicity, liminal subjectivity, and cultural hybridity may turn these into empty allegories for pseudo-realities that de-historicize specific social and historical relations of power. This is sufficiently illustrated and critiqued in the novel through Vasco Miranda’s commercial aesthetics, Francisco’s/Nehru’s urban modernity, and ultimately through the figure of the postexotic Moor in Aurora’s hyper-hybrid paintings. Through the failure of these characters-cum-artists, Rushdie warns against the transformation of postmodern hybridity from a primarily social condition into a worn-out metaphor and/or critical category that elevates all too conveniently the discourse of postcolonialism into abstract intellectualism.

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Replicating its own condition of production (both Moraes and Rushdie write the story while in confinement), *The Moor’s Last Sigh* brings into focus the ineluctable intertwining of its inherent “imaginative truth” (IH 10) and other determining “regimes of truth” that operate outside it (such as religious extremism, commercialism, censorship, politics of (mis)reading, media monopoly, and so on). The pre-fatwa self-exile, the chosen “elsewhereness” of the “literary migrant” which Rushdie theorized as an empowering position allowing him to “speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal” (IH 12; 15; 21), and the post-fatwa “odd position of an exile,” into which he was forced (Reder 201), must therefore be read as historically

and politically determined spaces which continue to inform and re-shape the modes of his literary productions and the kinds of critical reactions they generate. To celebrate homelessness and displacement in terms of the postmodern postulation that we are all migrants effortlessly floating across borderless spaces does not dislodge the dichotomous paradigms of dominant discourses; even less does it curb the invisibly operating but equally hegemonic forces of global capitalism. As Majid aptly puts it, “theorizing displacement does not render the global capitalist apparatus harmless” (190).

By exploring the potential failures of hybridized aesthetics, Rushdie critiques overzealous theorizations of the hybrid, the eclectic, the frontierless, the de-centered, and the free-floating so much in vogue in current postcolonial scholarship; for such theorizations often tend to neglect the immediate social and historical relations of power which constitute the very conditions of their determination. Privileging theories of cultural hybridity and transnational, free-floating subjectivity over historical and geo-political specificity masks the contingencies of capitalist structures of power that inform people’s experiences in different ways and in different locations (Behdad, “Postcolonial Theory” 231-32). Repeatedly re-constituted and re-imagined by Aurora in her mythically hyperbolic but eventually apocalyptic Moor paintings, the figure of the Andalusian King suggests a symbolic lament for the hybrid as a worn-out postcolonial metaphor rendered all the more unhelpful by the escalating sectarian violence in India in the 1980s and 90s. His transmogrification in Aurora’s canvases from a multicoloured figure of hope to a postlapsarian “figure of decay” simply nullifies the subversive value of a hybridity paradigm ungrounded in the politics of class and location. As such, the postexotic Arab King in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* figures

forth less as an agent of social change than as hybridity's unmoored Moor—its  
phantasmagoric hollow man.

## Chapter Four

### Gastro-Exotics: Loss, Exile, and Signifying Culinaria in Diana Abu-Jaber's

#### *Crescent and The Language of Baklava*

Food is perhaps the most evident marker of exotic otherness and the most accessible means whereby an embodied, performative experiencing of that otherness takes place. In a metropolitan multicultural context, as Sneja Gunew remarks, one notices how even a “taboo food” can become “a desirable marker of gastronomic richness and diversity that also acts as proof that the nation is an open and tolerant one, a guarantee of its cosmopolitanism” (“The Melting Pot” 150). Ethnic food festivals, specialty stores, ethnic restaurants and foodways are the measure by which a society gauges its level of multicultural diversity. As a transnationally floating signifier, however, food not only mediates a sensorial experiencing of exoticity (the effect of the exotic) but also carries within it the entangled histories of its production, trans-migration and global consumption, hence my phrase “signifying culinaria” whereby I allude to the power of food not only to encode memories, experiences and diverse structures of feeling but also to tell stories of its own journeys and transformations. The fact that ethnic foods often unravel tales about their own history of production and consumption is now becoming an exciting field of enquiry commanding the attention of cultural anthropologists and postcolonial critics. In their “food-following research” (660), Cook *et al.*, for instance, refer to “autoethnographic storytelling” as a form of culinary autobiography where the author relates his or her encounters with all those who were involved in the food’s journey from the farm where it was cultivated to the kitchen where it is cooked and consumed (660). Tracing the journey of a particular food from

the rural farm to the urban kitchen table oftentimes uncovers hierarchical relations of power–relations that determine the social condition of those whose lives and labour are bound up with the journey of that food. Such stories, Cook *et al.* note, help raise awareness about the inevitable but often invisible social connections and commonalities among different minorities across different geographies.<sup>96</sup>

As a culturally condensed idiom, food is often construed as an index of exotic otherness and as a means whereby that otherness is made accessible, albeit vicariously, for mainstream consumers. In cultural anthropology and postcolonial studies, food is increasingly occupying a pride of place, often conceptualized as a conduit of memory and nostalgia (Sutton; Bardenstein; Duruz, “Food as Nostalgia”); a metaphor for cultural hybridity, transnational relations, and cultural translations (Ray; Cook and Harrison; Cook, Crang and Thorpe; Somerville and Hartley); and a marker of ethnic and national identity (Cuzack; Appadurai, “How to Make a National Cuisine”; Molz; Gabaccia; Shortridge and Shortridge; Kadi; Narayan, *Dislocating*; Duruz, “Eating at the Border”; Gunew, “Introduction”). Postcolonial food discourse in particular, however, still leaves unaddressed the main problematics animating this thesis, namely, the potential complicity of the ethnic minority writer in an otherwise facile and consumer-based form of boutique multiculturalism. In a recent article, “Boutique Multiculturalism and the Consumption of Repulsion: Re-Disseminating Food Fictions in Malaysian and Singaporean Diasporic Novels,” Tamara S. Wagner attempts to disarticulate such complicity. In order to resist “the popular demand for self-Orientalization,” Malaysian and Singaporean food authors, for instance, often resort to what Wagner calls “the detailing of repulsion” (31). By “presenting repulsive descriptions of food and disgust as a reaction to its production, mastication, or

regurgitation,” these authors give expression to a “growing unease caused by the commercial and ideological exploitation of consumable multiculturalism” (31). Nevertheless, the work of these authors remains ineluctably complicated by “the enormous marketability of consciously ‘exotic’ representations” (31). For even “[c]ritiques of the consumable exotic in literature consequently assist in, and profit from, the popularity of clichés they initially set out to expose” (31). Gunew also draws attention to this easy alliance between ethnic food and multiculturalism where “the notion of multiculturalism as food is often the most benign version of accommodating cultural difference in various national contexts” (“Introduction” 227). Gunew here relies on Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection in order to draw an analogy between the mother-child reciprocal cannibalistic desires (eating and birthing) and the multicultural society feeding (literally and symbolically) on its ethnic minorities (151): “By offering their symbolic bodies [i.e., their food], the multicultural other can be accepted as a legitimate part of the society” (154).<sup>97</sup> More recently and in the same vein, Brinda Mehta has argued that “multicultural posturing” is one of the chief reasons for consuming ethnic foods. In the North American metropolis, for instance, Mehta goes on to explain, “the ingestion of Arabic food as a sign of multicultural liberalism does not necessarily lead to cultural sensitivity toward Arab American populations” (260).

In order to disarticulate the nexus of culinary exoticism and consumer-based multiculturalism I avail myself of the neologism “gastro-exotics” whereby I refer to the specific structuring of food tropes in a narrative in order to achieve the effect of the exotic. Tracing the metaphoricity of food in Diana Abu-Jaber’s two novels *Crescent* (2003) and *The Language of Baklava* (2005),<sup>98</sup> this chapter argues that the author’s culinary discourse dictates a model of reading that goes beyond the ethnographic

trappings of commodity culture. Critical works on Abu-Jaber have given short shrift to the relation between her elaborate gastro-exotics and her potential implication in what may be perceived as consumer-oriented self-Orientalizing. Such works have either focused on the author's attempt to come to grips with her Arab-American identity or emphasized the way she uses food as a metaphor to construct interethnic relations and redefine gender boundaries (Mehta 228-62; Ruba Turjman 146-47, 167; Fadda-Conrey). However, precious little is devoted to the centrality of the "abiding metaphor of food," as Abu-Jaber describes it, and her strategic, de-exoticizing autoethnographic writing as a whole ("Interview" 212). Drawing attention to the stakes involved in a food-mediated representation of ethnic difference, especially in the emerging genre of postcolonial food memoirs, I want to highlight Abu-Jaber's awareness of such stakes and the gastro-exotic tropes she deploys in order to steer clear of consumer-oriented autoethnography. More precisely, Abu-Jaber's narratives, I argue, are such that every seemingly exotic culinary feast is tactically woven through with references drawn from enduring historical memories about war and exile. What might otherwise be perceived in both novels as "exotic" Middle Eastern food is complicated by its evocation against a traumatic history of violence and diasporic dislocation. Such a historically grounded (or fractured) backdrop becomes the prism through which Abu-Jaber's postexotic culinary subtext is refracted.

Abu-Jaber's food tropes are postexotic, not because they indicate the inevitable hybridity of subjectivities and discourses, but rather because they ground foods and culinary cultures within concrete historical, social and political contexts. Abu-Jaber situates her food discourse not simply within the theoretical parameters of culture, identity and representation but also within a global paradigm that operates according to

historically defined relations of power and transnational demographic movements and displacements. Moreover, Abu-Jaber's autodiegetic food writing is structured in a way that resists its association with a pre-exilic, Edenic past and re-historicizes postcolonial food discourse by framing it within its specific politics of location.

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*Crescent* announces its postexotic subtext as early as its opening paragraphs. It is past midnight, and the moonless sky of Baghdad is surprisingly white:

The sky is white.

The sky shouldn't be white because it's after midnight and the moon has not yet appeared and nothing is as black and as ancient as the night in Baghdad. It is dark and fragrant as the hanging gardens of the extinct city of Chaldea, as dark and still as the night in the uppermost chamber of the spiralling Tower of Babel.

But it's white because white is the color of an exploding rocket. (15)

The serene stillness of the Chaldean city is shaken awake every night by the blinding light of Iranian rockets. It is Iraq's eight-year-long war with Iran. This is not a book about Baghdad, "the celestial capital" of the "glorious Abbasid Empire" (171), with its lush Babylonian gardens and glorious Chaldean palaces. The story of the Tower of Babel is, after all, the story of divine retribution visited upon those who dared to cross the boundaries separating the divine and the human, resulting in the broad scattering of the multi-tongued nation and in the earliest form of diasporic displacement. Clearly less exotic than the Oriental city one may imagine while reading the *Thousand and One*

*Nights*, Baghdad is now a war-ridden city, crumbling under the yoke of U.S. sanctions, its “Eastern domes” and “ancient ruins” entombed by “contemporary ruins from the war with Iran and the bombs from America” (373).

*Crescent* tells a modern-day love story between Sirine, the thirty-nine-year-old unmarried Iraqi-American chef raised by her uncle after her parents died during their mission for the Red Cross in Africa, and Hanif Al-Eyad (Han), the Iraqi exile who fled the country after Saddam Hussein came to power and who has recently been recruited as a linguistics professor in the Near Eastern Studies Department at UCLA, the same university where Sirine’s uncle also teaches. It is through their food sharing and storytelling that Sirine and Han come to a profound understanding of their divided identities and of the necessity to move forward—although the facts of loss and exile sometimes make such movement seem next to impossible.

It is at Nadia’s Café, the Lebanese restaurant where Sirine works, that she and Han meet for the first time. When the latter makes his first appearance at the Café, Sirine is at pains to disguise her attraction. His “straight and shiny” black hair, the “faint tropical sleepiness to his eyes,” the enigmatic English-Eastern Europeanness of his accent, the “pure and regal cast of his forehead” (24-31)—all remind Sirine of those fabulous heroes that populate her uncle’s *Arabian Nights*-inspired folktales. Sirine is also captivated by “the dark chocolate of Han’s voice” as he eloquently introduces the poet-cum-libertine Aziz Abdo, the recent hire in Han’s department (39). And since the portrait of the Ulysses-like Han (18) cannot be complete without a dash of mystery, Sirine is often led to ponder the “pale scar that flicks from the outer edge of one eye onto his cheekbone” (33), an injury he suffered while fleeing Saddam’s secret police. While it smacks of an exoticist romance, where an unsuspecting White European

maiden is habitually swept off her feet by a mysteriously swarthy Arab, this familiar à la Hollywood scenario is, of course, ironically undercut by the fact that the unmistakably American-looking Sirine is also half Arab.

Set in the heart of Teherangeles, the major Iranian neighbourhood in Los Angeles, Nadia's Café was originally owned by an Egyptian cook who decided to sell it when two CIA agents made it their site for uncovering "any terrorist schemes developing in the Arab-American community" during the Gulf War (21). When Um-Nadia, the new Lebanese owner, bought the café, she simply swatted the two agents away with her "kitchen towel" (21), a gesture confirming the un-policed "united nations" status of her restaurant (Mehta 252). Yet when two other American policemen start haunting the café, they simply do so, not as "homeland security" agents (Mehta 253), but as faithful clients addicted to Sirine's food and to Middle Eastern soap operas (Abu-Jaber, *Crescent* 23).<sup>99</sup> Boasting a "menu that claimed to be 'Real True Arab Food'" (21), Um-Nadia's restaurant is a vibrant microcosm aswarm with diverse ethnicities (Latin American, Arab-American, American, Iraqi, Lebanese, African-American, and Palestinian). While situating Arab-American writing within what she calls the "ethnic borderland," that is, within a space where interethnic relations are established (187), Carol Fadda-Conrey argues that in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* such relations are forged through the hyphenated protagonist, Sirine, as well as through her evolving culinary talent (193). In this respect, Nadia's Café is "the core of *Crescent*'s ethnic borderland, serving as the central locus of interethnic and intercultural interactions between Arabs, Arab Americans, Latinos, and white Americans, among others" (194). Submitting only partly to Fadda-Conrey's argument, I suggest that relationships at Nadia's Café, while structured around food in a way that emphasizes

horizontal rather than vertical inter-diasporic identifications, also reveal Abu-Jaber's misgivings about utopian projections of a transnational, diasporic *convivencia*.

Through such relationships, I argue, Abu-Jaber seems to critique emerging theories in postcolonial and cultural studies where a great deal of emphasis is placed on abstract and often de-historicized notions about the promise of transnational affiliations among diverse ethnic communities.

Abu-Jaber warns against the romantic idea of an interethnic transnationalism isolated from the contextual and geopolitical specificities that determine the everyday reality of each ethnicity. Thinking about ethnic minorities beyond the boundaries of geography and nation states helps de-center the Western paradigm that tends to freeze those minorities in their temporal and geographical distance (hence their perception in the Western metropole as constantly elsewhere and thus attractively exotic). But one must carefully keep in sight the material and socio-historical conditions that establish the actual urgency of each ethnic minority's predicament in a specific location. In "Cross over Food: Re-materializing Postcolonial Geographies," Cook and Harrison suggest that a study of the material and historical conditions that lead to the marketing of certain commodities (particularly food) as "'ethnic' or 'exotic'" may help direct the often text- or discourse-based postcolonial field of enquiry toward a more historicized, re-materialized critique of global capitalism and its hegemonies (299). Philip Crang, Claire Dwyer and Peter Jackson also accentuate the need to re-ground transnational studies, not in strictly geographical or strictly cultural terrains, but rather in an empirically based examination of the transnational mobility of commodities, an examination that brings the two terrains together (446). Such a "commodity perspective on things," as Arjun Appadurai puts it (*Social Life* 5), allows one to "trace

the global flows of specific commodities and cultural styles without falling into an uncritical celebration of what [Katharyne] Mitchell [...] describes as the ‘hype of hybridity’” (Crang, Dwyer, and Jackson 447).

Such “minor transnationalism” as conceptualized by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih, for instance, remains wanting if it simply highlights the “relational discourses among different minority groups” across national boundaries without sufficiently investigating the historical and material contingencies that are determined precisely by the specificity of each minority’s geographical location (2). As Katharyne Mitchell argues, “[i]t is geographical context, and thus geography as a discipline, that is best placed to force the literal and epistemological understandings of transnationalism to cohere.” Without “geographically informed research and theoretically nuanced understandings of difference and alterity,” she goes on to argue, such concepts as “anti-essentialism, mobility, plurality, and hybridity can quickly devolve into terms emptied of any potential political efficacy” (“Transnational Discourse” 110). Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan make a similar claim by taking to task diaspora theorists who overlook the importance of location as a “category that influences the specific manifestations of transnational formations” (16). Likewise, Ali Behdad insists that “[t]ransnational formations are always interpolated by the politics of location, and as such their manifestations can be quite varied” (“Postcolonial Theory” 231). Moreover, abstracting the transnational away from its specific politics of place renders its appropriation by dominant metropolitan forces all the more easy (Mitchell, “Different Diasporas” 533, 538). “Bringing geography back in” does not dictate that precedence be given to area studies over other ethnic or cultural studies (Mitchell, “Transnational Discourse” 1); nor does it require that “nation-state-based definitions” of these studies

be re-established (Lionnet and Shi 4). Rather, it reinstates the politics of location as one of the key determinants in interethnic affiliations and interculturality both nationally and internationally (Kaplan, "Politics" 138-39).<sup>100</sup> The transnational must be re-conceptualized as a socio-cultural space situated within the contextual framework of its historical and geographical specificity.

Utopian visions of minority transnationalism usually collapse when interethnic conflicts arise as a result of social and political unrest. Transnational minority discourse should not blind one to conflicted inter-minoritarian relations, relations that are inevitably complicated by racial, linguistic, religious, sexual and gender differences. Abu-Jaber dramatizes her misgivings about the potential failures of such discourse by showcasing the interethnic tensions that political crises may potentially trigger. Nadia's Café is not simply "a point of *rassemblage*, a symbolic center of diasporic gatherings in the United States through the commonality of food" (Mehta 250); it is also a space of inter-cultural contestation and tension, where modalities of "ethnic denial" are at play (Suleiman 15). Ethnic denial is a form of dis-identification with one's or another's ethnic community when stereotypes about that community acquire re-enforced opprobrium during times of crisis. During the First and the Second Persian Gulf Wars, for instance, non-Arab (but often perceived as Arab) members of the Teherangeles community make a point of distinguishing themselves from the "real" Arabs, that is, from the Bedouins, the indigenes of the Arabian Peninsula. Iranians, for example, refuse to enter Nadia's Café simply because its chef, Sirine, is half Iraqi (23). Even Um-Nadia, the "diasporic mother" who is genuinely sympathetic to the heartrending vulnerability of her Arab clientele (Mehta 251), is reluctant to identify herself as Arab. Like Materia's family in MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*, who

“considered themselves more Mediterranean, even European” (421), Um-Nadia in *Crescent* simply cherishes the false security of her Lebanese identity, having little concern for her Arab, Phoenician or druidic background (28). Um-Nadia (*Crescent*), Diana (later in *Language*), Kathleen (*Fall on Your Knees*), Shérázade (*Shérázade*), and Moraes (*MLS*)—all engage in one form of ancestral disaffiliation or another, particularly when their association with the Arab world becomes an onerous stigma.

Abu-Jaber suggests that during political crises, such as the Iraq War or the 9/11 war on terror,<sup>101</sup> the dynamic of ethnic denial intensifies, since external “identity markers” such as veils, turbans, beards, skin colour, names, and so on, become arbitrarily associated with a constructed image of a *potentially* threatening group (Naber 290; 278).<sup>102</sup> Such a homogenizing *mis*-identification generates interethnic *dis*-identification where one visible minority constantly emphasizes the cultural, linguistic, and religious differences that set it apart from other visible minorities.

In the frame story woven throughout the novel, Sirine’s uncle describes the current predicament of the Arab as follows:

No one wants to be the Arab—it’s too old and too tragic and too mysterious and too exasperating and too lonely for anyone but an actual Arab to put up with for long. Essentially, it’s an image problem. Ask anyone, Persians, Turks, even Lebanese and Egyptians—none of them want to be the Arab. They say things like, well, really, we’re Indo-Russian-Asian-European-Chaldeans. So in the end, the only one who gets to be the Arab is the same little old Bedouin with his goats and his sheep and his poetry about his goats and his sheep, because he doesn’t know that he’s the Arab, and what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.

(54-55)

Sirine's uncle's story (à la Scheherazade) is woven into the main narrative, providing coded reflections on the marginal condition of the Arab-American diaspora. It is the pseudo-biography of Abdelrahman Salahadin, one of Sirine's uncle's cousins and the son of a freed Nubian mother and a "burdened Iraqi Bedouin" (54), and his journey from the slave markets of Aqaba, Jordan, to Hollywood, "the Land of the Setting Sun" (228). Hopelessly addicted to selling himself to Saudi slavers, then escaping by "faking his drowning" (17), Salahadin gradually and magic-realistically metamorphoses into the now-famous Egyptian Hollywood actor, Omar Sharif, who was supposed to be the lead character in *Lawrence of Arabia*, were it not for what the director perceived as Peter O'Toole's more charming "see-through skin and see-through eyes" and well-water voice (357).<sup>103</sup> Yet Salahadin's Afro-Bedouin descent becomes a curious mixture enhancing his acting career, later on as Omar Sharif, and transforms him into a well sought-after exotic figure courted by Hollywood's bohemian starlets. While it may be viewed as deliberately promoting the book's exotic Orientalness, with its descriptions of enchanted characters, mermaids, and food-obsessed jinns, Salahadin's story is in fact ironic in its recycling of Orientalist stereotypes about Arabs, particularly those perpetuated by the Hollywood industry.

Arab immigrant students flock to Nadia's Café in order to flee such stereotypes and to enjoy a "little flavor of home" (22). Um-Nadia's recipes allow them to indulge in what Abu-Jaber calls in the Foreword to *The Language of Baklava* the immigrant's fantasy to "compress time and place" and re-invent him- or herself anew, but only to discover that "so much is lost" (xi). Sirine's uncle constantly avoids talking about Iraq simply because it saddens him to think that the Iraq he has left behind "doesn't exist anymore":

It means talking about the difference between then and now, and that's often a sad thing. And immigrants are always sad right from the start anyway. Nobody warns you when you leave town what's about to happen to your brains. And then some immigrants are sadder than others. And there's all kinds of reasons why, but the big one is that you can't go back. For example, the Iraq your father and I came from doesn't exist anymore. It's a new scary place. When your old house doesn't exist anymore, that makes things sadder in general. (142)

In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said describes exile in terms of an “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place” (173). While exile designates forced dislocation dictated by political oppression (although it may in some cases be embraced as a source of aesthetic inspiration), immigration is undertaken in search of a better quality of life. But both processes involve a sense of geographical displacement (deliberate or coerced) defined principally by loss. Exile may be an empowering subject position or a “strangely compelling [experience] to think about,” but the fact that it is always defined by indefinite absence from an existing geography is what makes it so “terrible” (Said, *Reflections* 173). Sirine's uncle tells her that if Han appears a bit intriguing, it is because he is an exile. All exiles “are messed up inside,” he explains, not because they left their country of origin but because they cannot return to it (53).

The notion of loss here is paramount to Abu-Jaber's strategic gastro-exotics, for by anchoring the Arab-American diasporan experience within the historically defined contexts of exile, immigration, and loss, Abu-Jaber immediately undermines the potential of reading that diaspora only through exoticist food-mediated lenses.

Both Sirine and Han strive to work through their respective sense of loss. Sirine cooks in order to keep alive the memory of her dead parents. For her, “food becomes a memorial of death and love to keep a cherished memory alive” (Mehta 229). When she started working at Nadia’s Café, “she went through her parents’ old recipes and began cooking the favourite—but almost forgotten—dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents’ tiny kitchen and her earliest memories” (22). Her Iraqi father and American mother were relief workers for the American Red Cross in Africa. They died while on a mission, leaving the nine-year-old Sirine under the guardianship of her paternal uncle. Sirine has inherited her gastronomical talent from her parents, and particularly her mother, who, according to her father, “thought about food like an Arab” (56). The moment she learns about her parents’ death, the nine-year-old Sirine hopes to bring them back by making “an entire tray of stuffed grape leaves all by herself,” the same dish that she learned from her (Christian) mother and that always and irresistibly enticed her (Muslim) father into the kitchen (56). Sirine learned from her parents that food can be a translinguistic, corporeal medium of intimacy in the crucible of which religious, linguistic, and racial demarcations can be diffused. While preparing baklava, Monday’s special at Nadia’s Café, Sirine remembers her mother telling her that the “baklava-maker should have sensitive, supple hands.” She then conjures the image of her mother placing in a tray the thin layers of dough one on top of the other after her father had gently stroked each with a brush dipped in drawn butter. Their movements were in synch, light, gentle, and fluid. “This was one of the ways that Sirine learned how her parents loved each other—their concerted movements like a dance” (66).

While Sirine is cooking and reminiscing, Han unexpectedly shows up at her kitchen, and they decide to make baklava together. Sirine finds herself still impressed by the “touch of insomnia in [Han’s] eyes,” by that “inward, solitary air” (67), but above all she is now entranced by the tempting physical closeness of their bodies and by the ethereal lightness of his movements around her. Not unsurprisingly, their shared baklava-making brings forth memories of the Old Country. Han remembers how he preferred his mother’s kitchen to his father’s orchard. The kitchen back in Baghdad was (is?) a pulsating domestic space where cooking is intricately intertwined with a rich female oral tradition. His mother told him that “if I knew how to make good baklava I would be irresistible to any woman” (68). Sirine, on her part, remembers the “larger secrets” underlying “her mother’s small lessons.” There is more to the “dicing of walnuts” and the “clarify[ing] of butter” than dexterity of movement or culinary craft, she realizes; these are “meditations on hope and devotion” (68). After an “exotic night” of love-making,<sup>104</sup> Han eventually confesses to Sirine his true feelings toward her: “You are the place I want to be—you’re the opposite of exile. When I look at you—when I touch you—I feel ease” (158). Han’s attachment to Sirine represents, in the words of Said, the “enactment of homecoming expressed through defiance and loss” (*Reflections* 175).<sup>105</sup> Sirine does not “show [Han] how to live in this country and how to let go of the other,” as her uncle suggests (53), as much as she allows herself to bear witness to the story of his and his family’s suffering caused first by Saddam’s Ba’ath regime and second by the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Their commensal and interlocutory bonding exemplifies what Abu-Jaber calls “tutorials in how to connect and empathize with others” (“Interview” 211).

Sirine and Han's relationship gradually transforms from courtship into an inter-affective process of mourning. Lest their food-sharing ritual be reduced to mere Oriental sensuousness where the culinary and the carnal metaphorize one another, Abu-Jaber punctuates it with Han's memories of irrecoverable loss and his predicament as a refugee seeker. The loss of the (mother)land seems to have left a permanent crack in his soul, like the crack in the paper-thin phyllo dough which he has unintentionally let go dry and which Sirine is exquisitely patching with buttered brushstrokes (68). "I miss my mother's coffee/I miss my mother's bread," says Han, quoting none other than Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, whose unwavering devotion to the Palestinian cause and painfully inspiring work on exile amounts to what Said calls "an epic effort to transform the lyrics of loss into the indefinitely postponed drama of return" (179). When Sirine asks Han whether Islam has any bearing on who he is, he rejoins that as an exile, he defines himself simply in terms of a baffling absence and irrecoverable loss:

I've heard people defining themselves according to their work or religion or family. I pretty much think I define myself by an absence. [. . .] I don't believe in a specific notion of God. But I do believe in social constructions, notions of allegiance, cultural identity. [. . .] The fact of exile is bigger than everything else in my life. Leaving my country was like—I don't know—like part of my body was torn away. I have phantom pains from the loss of that part—I'm haunted by myself. (182)

While absence implies the promise of return, loss implies permanent absence.<sup>106</sup> If loss suggests the former existence of something that is no more, absence gestures toward something there and not there at one and the same. Absence points simply toward traces of the absent object. In Han's case, such traces are represented by memories of

home where “both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” (Said 186). Han’s encounter with Sirine prompted him to retrieve old images of home, images he thought he had committed to oblivion but which are now superimposing their shadow on new ones. “And since I’ve met you,” Han confesses to Sirine, “it’s starting to return. [. . .] Every time I turn a corner lately, I seem to turn onto Sadoun Street or the Jumhurriya Bridge. Every person I talk to turns into the vegetable seller or my grade school teacher” (211).

Loss presupposes possession, for one cannot possibly lose what one has not previously possessed. Absence, on the other hand, presupposes neither possession nor loss; it empties the two concepts of any grounding certainty. The absent object does not completely nullify its possible re-possession, but it does not certify its loss either. Neither present nor lost, what is absent cannot be the object of conclusive mourning, since mourning is predicated primarily on irrecoverable loss. Hence, Han’s definition of his life as absence, a ghostly existence vacillating between the imminence of loss and the possibility of return and re-possession. As an exile, Han is like “those homeless people on the street,” as he once tells Sirine. “They know what it feels like—they live in between worlds so they’re not really anywhere. Exiled from themselves” (182-83). Han is caught between an eventless, non-historical absence and a yet-unconfirmed loss, constantly wresting himself from the paralyzing assaults of memories from home.

Unable to pin down his memories to a meaningful narrative, Han is haunted by mere “chips of details” and “bits of recollection,” residues of a former life remembered in flickering snapshots, at times hazy and at others agonizingly vivid (208). Memories are never complete or yielding. They oftentimes rush forth unannounced,

unpredictable, and unstoppable. They encroach upon the present, upsetting the subject's sense of direction: "For a moment—for a moment I forgot where I was. I forgot that this was America. I was on the banks of the Tigris. I could see the sun through my eyelids. My sister was about to call me in to eat. It's like the light broke into me and brought it all back and then I had to return to this place" (210).

Nevertheless, it is through food that both Han and Sirine remember and eventually work through their loss. Their commensal bonding and cooking symbolizes an embodied, performative work of mourning and coping, a common cathartic labour akin to storying and witnessing: "[...] I want to take you through my history, so it's inside of both of us, so you know who I am—really know," Han tells Sirine (211). In the baklava-making scene described earlier, Han recounts how painful his life was in Iraq, and as he does so, Sirine "patches the cracking layer with more butter," an act of empathetic healing symbolically reproducing the sewing of the scar on Han's face by a Bedouin cook as revealed later in the novel. Sirine and Han's in-chorus food preparation is not simply "their private language," their intimate wooing ritual (299); it is also a commensal modality for the cathartic transfer of affects. Abu-Jaber dissipates the aura of the exotic surrounding ethnic food by turning it into the central metaphor for historical loss and collective mourning.

Han's presence and confession allow Sirine to work through, in her turn, the loss of her parents. Becoming privy to Han's suffering, Sirine senses a similar "sensitive and silent element inside herself" (211). Han's exile story is the mirror in which Sirine sees the likeness of her own loss. She may feel that "[w]ork is home" (132), but she is unsure if work (i.e., cooking) could be family as well. Indeed, it is Han's presence that she needs in order to be able to compensate for the permanent loss

of her parents. When Han eventually and unexpectedly leaves for Iraq to visit his dying mother, memories of Sirine's parents reappear in the form of disturbingly persistent dreams. One morning, half-awake half-asleep, she is visited by "that forbidden dream, the dream-memory that she keeps shut away. She realizes with a soft pang, like remembering an old loss—something that should no longer mean anything but somehow still does—that she is already ten years older than her parents were when they died" (350). Han's sudden disappearance unhinges the safety valve that has until now staved off the dreaded onrush of that "dream-memory" where she continuously envisions the same gruesome scenario of her parents' death in Africa (349-50).

Memories are often uncontrollable when triggered, yet "they give our lives their fullest shape, and eating together helps us to remember" (Abu-Jaber, *Language* xi). In *Crescent*, memory and commensality are essential to the working through of trauma. By way of connecting with Han and his history, Sirine decides not only to prepare his "childhood food," but also to have an Arabic-style Thanksgiving (Abu-Jaber, *Crescent* 214). When the rice-stuffed turkey and its choicely improvised Arab-American accompaniments are ready (220), when the table is set, and when all the gleeful, multi-ethnic guests from Nadia's Café and Han's department are seated and start their usual and often heated discussions about American and Middle Eastern politics, Sirine, the architect of this sumptuous repast, is content to see the workings of her "small secret" and the confirmation of "the only truth she seemed to possess," namely, "that food is better than love: surer, truer, more satisfying and enriching. As long as she could lose herself in the rhythms of peeling an onion, she was complete and whole. And as long as she could cook, she would be loved" (217-18).

This East-meets-West Arab-version Thanksgiving meal may constitute the quintessential metaphor that comes closest to describing Sirine's mixed identity and the constant experimental articulation of that identity through the idiom of which she is the unsurpassed master: food. Moreover and as Mehta argues, Sirine's Arabized Thanksgiving feast allows her "to de-essentialize Han's identity from the inaccuracy of romantic nostalgia, a misconception that distorts her own search for an idealized Arab authenticity represented by his exotic foreignness and exilic status" (247-48).

On the other hand, however, one would be remiss not to mention that Sirine's Arab Thanksgiving repast is also the scene where "things go bad" (Abu-Jaber, "Interview" 218). It marks the beginning of "internal tensions" in Sirine and Han's relationship (218). Not only does Sirine lose Han's treasured gift to her, his mother's scarf (which later turns out to be his sister's), but she also allows herself to be seduced by Aziz and eventually to sleep with him shortly before Han's sudden departure. Such a negative turn of events is tacitly signalled by the "tainted" lamb pie which Aziz brought with him. (The lamb is considered cursed by the evil eye because a bird flew into the butcher shop where it was bought.) While this may not be "a very psychological perspective" to explain the characters' motivations, as Abu-Jaber admits, the evil eye element which Aziz brings into the story symbolizes the otherwise imperceptible tensions that may emerge in cross-cultural encounters (218). A symbolic dramatization of an ideal transnational diasporic space though it may be, the Arab Thanksgiving scene also indicates the ways in which Abu-Jaber's postexotic metaphors bring to the fore her reservations about the potential complications that may surface at the intersection of cultures.

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Contemporary cookbook memoirs indicate a clear investment in culinary traditions as nostalgic conduits of cultural memory, shared history, and collective identity.<sup>107</sup> In *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (2001), David Sutton probes the complex relationship between food and memory. He argues that memory is not simply the act of activating a presumably static store of images and experiences; rather, it is the result of an ongoing “interaction between the past and the present” (9). As such and in an anthropological sense, memory becomes a matter of performance, a constantly and dynamically evolving practice, rather than a stable and easily retrievable text (11). This is not to dismiss verbal or textual memory, but to heed the embodied and ceremonial actualizations of it (12). And food, in this respect, plays a significant role in the performative activation of memory, for it partakes of a collective communal practice aimed at inscribing a “*prospective memory*,” that is, a practice aimed at “orienting people toward future memories that will be created in the consumption of food” (Sutton 28; emphasis in original). Such prospective memories, in their turn, will transform into “memories of *gemeinschaft*,” where food functions as “a metonym for the community values that many people feel are under threat from the forces of modernization” (53).

The conceptualization of food as a preserver of historical memory and as an embodied link to the Old Country explains, in part, the current popularity of the postcolonial food memoir. Such popularity corresponds to the emergence of what Appadurai describes as a form of “culinary cosmopolitanism,” where the culinary cultures of rural communities (India being Appadurai’s case study here) are increasingly transforming from an orally transmitted heritage into transcribed,

globalized, readily accessible cookbooks and online recipes (“How to Make a National Cuisine” 7). While such cookbooks “combine the sturdy pragmatic virtues of all manuals with the vicarious pleasures of the literature of the senses,” they also “tell unusual cultural tales” where social hierarchies and structures of power are obliquely embedded (3). It is such “unusual cultural tales” that I want to explore by emphasizing the ways in which postcolonial food memoirs, such as Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava*, can undercut the exoticist discourse while operating within it. In other words, Abu-Jaber’s postexotic autoethnography, as I read it, simultaneously orchestrates and disrupts the book’s exotic appeal, first, by relating her culinary tropes to the inevitable identitarian rift at the kernel of the immigrant experience, and second, by grounding them within the specific and shifting contexts of social and historical memory.<sup>108</sup>

Let me begin with Françoise Lionnet’s definition of autoethnography.<sup>109</sup> Unlike classic, canonical autobiography, where the narrative revolves around a single, self-mythologizing consciousness (that of the life writer), autoethnography posits the speaking subject as a member of a larger ethnic community for which he or she is the spokesperson. Postcolonial autoethnography derives its counter-discursive and legitimizing power from the need to “revise and rewrite official, recorded history” (Lionnet, “Of Mangoes” 321). As an emerging literary genre, autoethnography is concerned less with “the retrieval of a repressed dimension of the *private* self” than with “the re-writing of [...] ethnic history [and] the recreation of a *collective* identity through the performance of language” (334; emphasis in original). The use of Creole in such Jamaican texts as Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng*, for instance, is meant to create semantic and cultural ambiguities that purposefully preclude the text’s appropriation by a mainstream English-speaking Western readership. The recourse to local vernacular in

autoethnographic texts not only functions as “a specific link to a more or less ‘authentic’ cultural past,” but it also inscribes itself strategically as “radically ‘other’ for an English speaker,” thus creating “a distance between narrator and reader” and “undermining the reader’s belief in the value of ‘clarity’” (334).

While Lionnet argues that the autoethnographic text capitalizes on the subject’s privileged appurtenance to a specific ethnic culture as a bulwark against the facile appropriation of that culture and against “any simplistic understandings based on its purely referential value” (334), Anne Goldman makes a similar argument but follows a different line of reasoning. Discussing what she perceives as the “conflation of ethnographic and autobiographic discourse” in Hispanic food memoirs, Goldman argues that such memoirs do sail close to, but eventually steer clear of, “cultural appropriation” essentially because they anchor ethnicity and cultural identity not in “a communal subject” only (as is the case in Lionnet’s definition) but also in an autonomously authoritative one (188). Autoethnographic texts such as Fabiola Cabeza de Baca’s *The Good Life* (1948), Goldman explains, “confound the line traditionally drawn between autobiography proper, where the subject is presumed to constitute herself as unique, and ethnography, whose postcolonial origin has situated the subject as representative of a culture, typically a culture of ‘dying breeds’” (189). In Goldman’s definition, the autoethnographic text operates on two levels: on one level, it casts the speaking subject as a representative and a cultural translator; on another, it endows that subject with an idiosyncratic autonomy that immediately intervenes in the potential appropriation of his or her culture by a mainstream readership. Making ethnic culture a function of individual experiences—that is, a function of the way it is experienced by each individual member—precludes the homogenization of that culture

and its recuperation and promotion as if it were a monolithic construct that has its recognizable representatives.

Providing “an alternative to the tendentiously-characterized ‘conventional’ autobiography, on the one hand, and the exoticizing, native-silencing brand of anthropology, on the other” (Buzard 73), *The Language of Baklava* strategically posits the autoethnographer as a Spivakian “Native Informant,” an agential ethnic voice operating—always in a slightly complicitous way—as the object *and* the subject of the participant-observer model characteristic of classic ethnographic discourse.

The narrative is divided up into chapters featuring a plethora of recipes, along with autobiographical anecdotes drawn from Abu-Jaber’s childhood and adulthood both in the U.S. and in Jordan. “Nostalgic Chicken Livers,” “Diplomatic *Magloubeh*,” “Poetic Baklava,” “Innuendo Squash,” and “Fatherly Fried Eggs”—such is Abu-Jaber’s à la carte table of contents where each chapter is supplemented with recipes that are either set off from the main narrative text or craftily kneaded into it. Although the mouth-watering culinary concoctions dispersed throughout the narrative may seem to be a self-conscious exoticist peppering of the book, *The Language of Baklava*, I argue, eventually obviates auto-exoticist ethnocentrism by undercutting any idealized, sentimental representations of a purportedly Edenic “elsewhere” with which ethnicities and their exotic foods tend to be associated in a mainstream, metropolitan society.

Much of the memoir is focused on how both Abu-Jaber (Diana)<sup>110</sup> and her father, referred to as Bud, struggle to come to an understanding of their sense of identity and belonging as the family journeys back and forth between upstate New York and Jordan. While Diana is at pains to reconcile the duality of her Arab-American cultural make-up, Bud is struggling to re-create himself anew each time he

visits one country or the other. Such struggles are often riddled with painful conflicts that come to shape the everyday reality of immigrant families in the U.S. such as the Abu-Jabers. For instance, after the thirteen-year-old Diana and her father have a thunderous and long quarrel over her poor performance in school and her presumably un-Arabic conduct, Bud announces his intention of sending her back to Jordan. Now back in Syracuse, after her first one-year-trip to Jordan at the age of seven where she had had her first but still tenuous inklings of racism through remarks made about her non-Arab looks by Bud's relatives and her Jordanian boon companions (43; 49-50; 56), Diana seems to have "lost [her] sense of Jordan" and is starting to feel relatively secure in her burgeoning "American self" (134-35). At her father's announcement that he is going to ship her back to Jordan because she has not been behaving as a good Arab girl should, but rather as those "Bad-boy-crazy-American-girls" (195), Diana retaliates with a sense of denial characteristic of American-born children of immigrant background: "I'll never go back there. You can't make me. [...] That isn't my home. I don't care what you say. My home is *here*. [...] My family isn't Jordanian. [...] My family is American!" (182; emphasis in original).

It is precisely at such moments of identificatory conflict that Abu-Jaber's autodiegetic labour brings into focus its postexotic *foodprints*. Constantly attentive to the historical, social and cultural determinations of such conflicts (immigration, discrimination, hybridity, displacement, and so on), Abu-Jaber makes food the central metaphor through which the historical and the personal can be tentatively resolved. As in *Crescent*, a baklava-making scene in this memoir is all-important for a conceptualization of the commensal as an everyday modality of self-knowledge and inter-subjective relations. Diana's sixty-year-old childless Aunt Aya, Bud's older sister

and a much-venerated matriarchal family figure, eventually intervenes to smooth things over and to reason both father and daughter out of their “dog-headed nonsense” (184). Aunt Aya is endowed with many shamanic talents: bone setting, exorcism, cup reading, and herbal healing, amongst many others (179). But her special recipe to put an end to this “Long War”<sup>111</sup> is to initiate Diana into the secret language of baklava, emphasizing the Greek etymology of the word, as opposed to the Arabic *baklava*, and this in compliance with Diana’s temporary melodramatic rejection of all things Arab (181). Baking here constitutes young Diana’s first “tutorial in ‘womanliness,’ designed to make [her] womanly way in the world” (186). Aunt Aya delivers her life lessons in the form of apothegmatic foodism: eat parsley before you kiss a boy and say something nice about his mother afterward; spices are most eloquent when heated up; life should be “light, pure, and delicate” like clarified butter; do not believe what men say if their eyes and hands remain invisible when they say it (188-89).

Curiously enough, young Diana’s days-long culinary catechism turns out to be centered less on how to *make* baklava than on how to *think* about baklava-making (for her Aunt taught her only how to make phyllo dough). Generally, food preparation can be extremely strenuous and tedious unless approached with the right mindset: “Food is aggravation and too much work and hurting your back and trapping the women inside like slaves,” Aunt Aya tells Diana, as they both work on the phyllo dough and many other pastries (189). But the true act of cooking is more than just a combination of proper ingredients and right proportions. It is an act of self-expression, love, and generosity. Only to a gastrophilanthropist, Diana learns, shall food yield its secrets.

The baklava-making scene is crucial not only because it dramatizes commensality as a modality of trans-generational bonding but because it helps us

understand how Abu-Jaber's autoethnographic narrative discourse transforms food from a conduit of nostalgic memory to a performative, feminist-inflected expression of identity. Commensality, as shown in *Crescent*, is not so much about the recuperation of a pristine, unadulterated past as it is about situating and reclaiming a sense of selfhood in the present. When Diana eventually tastes the baklava that Aunt Aya made with the same phyllo dough they prepared together a few days before, Diana intuits what those secrets are:

When I inhale Auntie Aya's baklava, I press my hand to my sternum, as if I am smelling something too dear for this world. The scent contains the mysteries of time, loss, and grief, as well as promises of journeys and re-birth. I pick up a piece and taste it. I eat and eat. The baklava is so good, it gives me a new way of tasting Arabic food. It is like a poem about the deeply bred luxuries of Eastern cultures. (191)

Once Bud has contentedly had his fill with Aunt Aya's baklava and promised not to threaten his daughters with an indefinite trip back to Jordan, Diana feels for the first time that she is finally home—wherever that may be (191-92).

Although an expert cook, Aunt Aya refuses to have her recipes written down. She only demonstrates them once, and then no one seems to remember them. "If you write them," she explains, "they lose their power" (185-86). Writing down recipes strips them of their power to bring people together, turning cooking into a mechanical, solitary act. By extension, cookbooks standardize, homogenize, and commercialize ethnic food culture by reducing it to a mechanical, de-personalized, domestic routine. In an orally transmitted culinary tradition, however, cooking through recollection is not only an exercise in memory but also a practice in immediate bonding. As an oral

commensal tradition, food preparation and consumption solidifies social values and communal relations. It is an embodied form of knowledge transmission as well as a metonym for inter-subjective and inter-communal connections (Sutton 53).

Food is an exercise in amnesia, not in memory. Aunt Aya cautions Diana not to think of food simply as a memory ritual: “People say food is a way to remember the past. Never mind about that. Food is a way to forget” (189). Aunt Aya considers her brother Bud “the worst of the worst” because he refuses to accept the inevitable consequences of his geographical displacement. Although in the U.S. for many years now, Bud’s “longing for Jordan is at the center of his identity” (137), and that identity is still obsessively immersed in the culinary bond he maintains with the Old Country. But as Aunt Aya proclaims, “Jordan is not the place he thinks it is. It won’t save him; it can’t even save itself” (187). To re-create and retain the tastes and smells of Jordan, Bud dreams about opening a restaurant where “an amazing, modern combination of Arabic and American food” is served (169). Bud’s dream restaurant would be a “golden place, [...] a Shangri-la that finally heals the old wound between East and West. All languages will be spoken here, all religions honoured. And food will be pure and true as the first food, the kind that weighed down golden boughs and shone in the wind” (172). Bud’s idea of “Arab-fusion food” (172) is endearingly compelling, for it metaphorizes almost every immigrant’s fantasy to create him- or herself anew. But such fantasy often turns into a nightmare when the project of self-renewal is inevitably stymied by the concrete conditions of dislocation and loss. Bud’s numerous trips back to Jordan make him realize that the Old Country is simply “the shadow of a memory,” the revival of which he keeps projecting in personal visions about a modern-day culinary utopia.

No longer the land of “fairness, honor, and respect”—those “huge, impossible things” in which Bud believed with quixotic conviction (127)—Jordan is now the land of greedy entrepreneurs and back-stabbing siblings, competing in glitz and glamour with America’s *Baywatch* and *The Bold and the Beautiful* (275). It is the land where Diana’s Great Uncle Jimmy, the richest and yet the stingiest of the Abu-Jabers, is involved in suspicious cross-border human trafficking between Jordan and Sri Lanka (256-57). The desert-dwelling Bedouins of Yehdoudeh, the “fertile” and “ancient” village of Diana’s magnificently age-defying great grand-uncle, have virtually disappeared, “as cars and trains and modernity have crowded them out” (278). Yehdoudeh is referred to as “‘khirbet Abu-Jaber,’ literally ‘the Abu-Jaber Ruins,’” a fitting reflection on the family history itself (278). The Abu-Jabers’ ancestral estate is transformed into a simulacral reproduction of what it once was. It is now a tourist’s treasure house for haberdasheries, knickknacks, and fake Orientalia, a mini-bazaar wherein the signs of the global reach of “Western capitalization” are writ large (280):

It’s a corridor filled with old-timey desert craft shoppes filled with possibly authentic crafts like embroidered dresses, glass bottles layered with colored sands, and mosaic-etched china. There are T-shirts that say “I ♥ King Hussein,” and “I kiss camels,” as well as plastic key chains, porcelain figurines, and coin purses embossed with amulets against the evil eye. (279)

How similar Abu-Jaber’s Yehdoudeh is to Salman Rushdie’s post-Andalusian Benengeli, the “pedestrianised” and “denatured” city of “parasites”! Saturating her autodiegetic narrative with concrete social and historical memory (cultural Westernization, capitalist entrepreneurship, and a tourist-oriented global consumer economy), Abu-Jaber simultaneously enunciates her autoethnographic insider privilege

as a *relatively* authoritative spokesperson for her father's ethnic culture and precludes the potential un-complicated recuperation of that culture by a Western readership as a mere exotic, indigenous "elsewhere" or as a repository of presumably occult and untainted Golden-Age values.

Bud's real anagnorisis, however, occurs not upon his visit to this much-changed ancestral land, but upon an unspeakable incident of family disloyalty. His brother Frankie tries to swindle him out of his life's savings by selling him an exorbitantly overpriced house which Bud intends to turn into his Jordan-based dream restaurant. But Aunt Aya intervenes once again, and it is Bud who now receives his life lesson. As she drives him around Amman's "commercial boulevards" and shows him buildings that are nicer and cheaper than Frankie's (304), Bud comes to the painful realization "that Jordan wasn't what he thought it was, that his family [...] didn't exist—not in the pristine sense that he wanted it to" (304-05). Unable to bear the brunt of family betrayal and jolted out of his "nomadic wanderlust" and its romantic visions of homeland and self-renewal (Abu-Jaber, "Interview" 217), Bud eventually returns to the U.S. and purchases a driving-range canteen where he sells hamburgers, French fries, and ice cream—far from being his dream restaurant. Bud realizes that "the type of food doesn't matter so much [...]; it's cooking it and feeding people and watching them eat, keeping them alive in the desert of the world—that is all he really cares about" (*Language* 325). While Nadia's Café in *Crescent* represents Abu-Jaber's imagining of a transnational, multicultural space where interethnic relations can be established around ethnic foods and other culinary idioms, Bud's "mainstream" restaurant in *The Language of Baklava* suggests that such relations may still be forged without the mediation of "authentic" (exotic) culinary signifiers.

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Relying on the expansive metaphoricity of food, Abu-Jaber invites her reader to contemplate the traumas of exile and displacement that underlie the formation and expression of ethnicity and cultural identity. Placing the material and psychological repercussions of diasporic displacement at the center of her food tropes, Abu-Jaber suggests that cultural identity is not an ontological totality that can be readily retrieved, re-fashioned, or theorized. Rather, it is a historically situated self-positioning process, a process the ambivalence of which is principally a function of specific social and geopolitical contingencies. To remain “unmoored between countries” and simply “to live in the taste of things” (318), as she puts it at the end of her food memoir, indicates less a nostalgia for a figurative redemptive return to a pristine, pre-diasporan past than a metaphor for an immediate and historically conscious negotiation of one’s identity within specific, albeit changing, geographical locations. “Once we are grown, we are no longer so porous, our identities don’t connect with a place as much as they do when *we grow up with a place and the places, in turn, grow into us*” (327; emphasis added). Reading Abu-Jaber’s culinary discourse against predominant myths about food as a bridge between the present condition of exile and pre-exilic memory, “one is more constantly aware of the gap covered by the bridge and of the ‘before’ and ‘after’ as distinct entities separated by a rupture” (Bardenstein 363-64). Moreover, and in order to preclude an exoticist, food-mediated, reductive perception of the Arab-American diaspora, Abu-Jaber is ever mindful of the historical ruptures, the cultural alienation, and the traumas of war and exile to which that diaspora is often subjected. As a metropolitan Arab-American author, Abu-Jaber capitalizes on—but by no means

oversimplifies her perceived insider perspective in order to cultivate an agentive, relatively self-authorizing autoethnographic discourse that simultaneously stages and undercuts the potential exoticization of her indigenous Arab background.

## Conclusion: Arabs and the Exoticization of Terror

Reading the texts of Leila Sebbar, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Salman Rushdie, and Diana Abu-Jaber, one detects parodic resistances to the exoticist pattern consistently informing discursive and visual representations of Arabs. It is precisely at this front of discursive and imaginative resistance that the literary—as I perceive it in these authors' works—continues to compel our critical and political endeavors. Sebbar's *Shérazade*, for instance, engages with the ongoing commercial popularization of the Arab harem in French popular culture against the background of colonial violence and Beur alienation. Tropes of harem erotics are also evoked in MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* but within the larger context of Canada's multicultural discourse in its incipient, pre-institutional phase. Here I trace tropes of postexotic Arabness in order to suggest that such a discourse and its subsequent institutionalization often lead to male-oriented, exoticist spectacularization of ethnic difference in general, reducing identity markers such as race, gender, religion, and ethnic tradition to embellishing accessories in a quintessentially white, Anglo-centric, national culture. Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* furthers the discussion of multiculturalism by tracing it back to its Andalusian enclave, where Christians, Jews, and Muslims co-existed relatively peacefully for an extended period of time. Rushdie's nostalgic invocation of Arab Andalusia as a model for an Indian-style *convivencia*, I argue, is parodically undermined by the potential failure of such a model. The Arab King Boabdil is the central figure through which such a failure is expressed, as he develops from a symbol of hybridity, cultural plurality, and tolerance to a symbol of decay reflecting India's collapse into sectarian politics, ethnic violence, and entrepreneurial corruption. Finally, the thesis focuses on

food as perhaps the most visible index of exotic otherness in a multicultural context. Reading Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* and *The Language of Baklava*, I emphasize the ways in which the author's strategic postexoticism transforms food from a medium whereby the "exotic" Middle Eastern Other is consumed (cannibalized) to a vehicle for confronting the traumas of war, exile, and loss. While *Crescent* deploys culinary tropes moored in the history of the Iraq War and its psychological repercussions on the Iraqi-American exile, *The Language of Baklava* develops an autoethnographic discourse that uses food metaphors in order to dispel the exotic aura still hovering around postcolonial food memoirs. Abu-Jaber's two works can be considered postexotic precisely because they dissociate Arabic cuisine from a purportedly Edenic indigenous past while anchoring it in the historical and cultural ruptures defining the modern Arab-American diasporic experience.

Situating itself within the broad post-Orientalist discourse which Said has anticipated as an alternative to the ongoing East-West conflict, my thesis is informed by a critique, at times explicit and at others implicit, of de-historicized postcolonial theorizations of multiculturalism, hybridity, and transnationality. Attentive to the many enunciations of Arabness from within its various geo-political enclaves (North Africa, Europe, South Asia, and North America), my thesis theorizes the postexotic Arab as a trope designating a sense of Arabness born out of historically-situated, (self-)parodic re-arrangements of Orientalist metanarratives. Delineating the contours of postexotic Arabness is thus useful in two ways: on the one hand, it draws attention to the specific historical relations of power and the geopolitical contingencies that determine the global commodification of cultural difference in general; on the other hand, and more specifically, it reveals how the Arab world in particular continues to be subjected to

sensational spectacularizations manipulated by hegemonic media corporations and private publishing industries. It takes no more than a little stroll in the local bookstore for one to realize how books about Arabs continue to be packaged in a manner that perpetuates the same Orientalist, monochromatic iconography that Said tried to uncover more than twenty-five years ago. Advertising blurbs, cover designs, and promotional comments by renowned academics—all these constitute the paratextual paraphernalia that testify to the sad fact that the Arab world is a function not only of how it is narrated but also of how it is packaged.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, understanding postexotic Arabness acquires an even greater significance, for it helps us probe the motives behind the proliferating media industry that now profitably creates spectacles of terror at the kernel of which the figure of the fanatic Arab continues to loom larger and larger. Identifying the trope of the postexotic Arab in contemporary literary and cultural productions, as my thesis does, has two main objectives: first, it throws into relief the contours of an exoticist discursive pattern in which the Arab is paradoxically portrayed as an attractive but still potentially threatening figure. Second, it traces the imaginative modalities with which European- and North American-educated postcolonial authors register their responses to the persistent “clash of civilization” discourse—a discourse to which the events of 9/11 have simply given a renewed global currency. I suggest that the 9/11 event is a turning point in that it has brought into focus a paradigm shift in which the spectacle of the angry Arab is indeed the new spectacle of the exotic. In other words, the exoticized spectacle is no longer that of the harem woman, the erotic belly-dancer, or the Oily sheik frolicking with his virgins and eunuchs, as illustrated in many early *Arabian Nights*-inspired Hollywood productions, but rather the kuffiyah-

wearing, effigy-burning pyromaniac frantically shouting “down with America,” as seen nowadays in the overly sensational media reporting on Middle Eastern crises.

Although the texts I study mostly predate the World Trade Center attacks, they generally seem to suggest that the will to exoticize and/or the will to demonize operate along the same Orientalist continuum, and the pre-eminence of one or the other is simply a function of global consumer culture and shifting geopolitical interests. Contemporary representations of Arabs continue to be disturbingly tainted with lingering Orientalist misconceptions. September 11<sup>th</sup>, the war in Iraq, March 11<sup>th</sup>, and the entire “Islam industry” that these and many other events have set in motion show how little today’s mainstream media have done to dissipate either the cloud of aggression or the mist of exoticism that continue to hover around the figure of the Arab.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> HLMs, *habitations à loyer modéré*, were low-cost, modern public lodgings built during the 1960s for low-income working-class families, both French and immigrant. Recently, however, they have become “the ghettos of the primarily North African (most significantly, Algerian), unemployed population of urban communities” (Orlando 168). For an extensive discussion of French urban planning and immigrant housing projects, see Paul A. Silverstein, esp. 76-120. See also Mireille Rosello’s “North African Women and the Ideology of Modernization: From *bidonvilles* to *cités de transit* and HLM” in Hargreaves and McKinney.

<sup>2</sup> When available, English translations are used with corresponding page numbers and bibliographic entries. All other translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup> “Maghrebians” and “North Africans” are used interchangeably in reference to the residents of the Maghreb countries, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. The “Maghreb” (meaning “west” in Arabic) designates the western regions of the Islamic Arab world.

<sup>4</sup> One of the accepted versions is that the word *Beur* was in fact *Arabe* read backward, an inversion of syllables with slight phonetic variation, which is a common practice in the vernacular of immigrant-populated French ghettos; so *cum*, for instance, is used instead of *mec* (fellow), *meufle* instead of *femme* (woman), and *beur* for *arabe*, and so forth. While it serves as a secret code invented by immigrant youths to mislead French authorities, such an inversion of words is also part of a countercultural subversion of the notion of nameable identity, an unsealing of the totalizing labels usually attached to different ethnic groups. On the socio-political implications of such an appellation, see also Begag and Chaouite, esp. 83-84.

<sup>5</sup> Unlike that of Tunisians and Moroccans, the large-scale immigration of Algerians “was no immigration at all, but a movement within the same nation-state,” for after 1848 Algeria “was held to be, quite literally, an extension of French soil, a status that marked it off from the Protectorates of Tunisia (established 1881) and Morocco (1912).” The presence of Algerian workers in France was further enhanced by “the law of 15 July 1914 which had granted all Algerians complete freedom of movement to France” (MacMaster 14; 134).

<sup>6</sup> The 1983 two-month “*Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme*” (“March for Equality and against Racism”), which would later be called “*Marches des Beurs*” (“March of the Beur”), started in Marseille with a group of 50 Maghrebians and ended in front of the Presidential Palace in Paris with over 100,000 protestors denouncing the ongoing racial treatment of immigrants in France. This non-violent march was a key event not only because it brought massive, if temporary, public attention to the Maghrebian community as a socially, culturally, and politically marginalized ethnic group, but also because it marked the burgeoning of what later came to be recognized as a distinct Beur culture that had its own artists, singers, journalists, activists, writers, and poets, but that still inhabited the fringes of the official political spectrum. On the ubiquity of Beur culture in contemporary France, see David A. McMurray’s “*La France Arabe*” in Hargreaves and McKinney. On the political disenfranchisement of France’s ethnic minorities, see David Blatt’s “*Immigrant Politics in a Republican Nation*” also in Hargreaves and McKinney.

<sup>7</sup> “*La France et les Français d'abord*” (“France and the French First”) was one of the infamously xenophobic slogans that Le Pen and his party, the “*Front National*,” used to garner electoral support and political clout throughout the 1980s and that, surprisingly enough, got him to the second round in the 2002 presidential election—an unprecedented success in the history of France’s Far-Right politics. Even Jacques Chirac, the incumbent French President, was neither sparing nor tactful in his complaints in 1991 (he was mayor of Paris then) about the “noise and smell” of immigrants with which his Parisian constituents had to put up everyday. It brings the Frenchman to the verge of insanity, he declared, to see

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“his next door [immigrant] neighbor—a family where there is one father, three or four wives and twenty-odd kids, getting fifty thousand francs in social security payment without going to work: add to the noise and smell and it drives the French worker crazy” (qtd. in Freedman 1-2).

<sup>8</sup> Similar to the 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act, the 1990 “droit à la différence” (“Law of Difference”) in France forbids “[a]ll discrimination founded on ethnicity, a nation, a race, or a religion” (qtd. in Orlando 225). The concept is controversial because by relying on anthropological and biological categories of identification such as race, religion, ethnicity, and language, it endorsed “a veiled mechanism of exclusion” (Blatt 49). It did not erase difference; rather, it made it easier to identify and thus to isolate those who carry its mark, ultimately engendering what Silverstein calls “differentialist neo-racism” (188). For a comprehensive discussion of the (de)merits of multiculturalism and its relation to the dynamics of recognition and seclusion with regard to ethnic minorities, see Stanley Fish’s article “Boutique Multiculturalism” as well as Graham Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic*, especially 124-76.

<sup>9</sup> In order to tackle the problem of youth unemployment in France’s underprivileged suburban areas and thus to help decrease street violence, in 2006 France’s then-Prime Minister, Dominique de Villepin, introduced the CPE legislation (“Contrat de Première Embauche”—First Employment Contract) according to which the employer has a full two-year legal right to fire without any justification any newly hired employee under the age of 26. The legislation is found unacceptable particularly by the immigrant community among which the youth unemployment rate is remarkably high. On the one hand, it provides employers with legal sanction to fully exploit, at least for the first two years, their new employees; on the other hand, it forces employees to accept that exploitation, lest they lose their job (Ramonet pars. 5-6). Although the bill was eventually repealed in April 2006, its hasty introduction and repeal is another sign of tactless, short-sighted government policies with regard to the vexed issues of immigration and unemployment.

<sup>10</sup> The riots took place in the poor suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois when two immigrant youths of North and West African origin, fleeing a police identity check, took refuge in a neighbouring electrical sub-station and were electrocuted.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting here that in common French usage the distinction between Arab and North African/Maghrebian is almost automatically elided (many Maghrebians are not Arabs, but Berbers), in the same way that Arabs in popular media today are factitiously associated with Muslims (Arabs constitute only a small portion of the world’s Muslim population). Moreover, although “Maghrebi” or “Maghrebian” was introduced after decolonization as a “less tainted term” than “Arab,” it “has become virtually synonymous with *immigré*, another highly tainted term.” Such a conflation of lexical/nomenclatural, ethnic, and religious determinants is bound up with a “neo-colonial gaze” to which the Beurs are the main target (Hargreaves and McKinney 18-20).

<sup>12</sup> Orlando further distinguishes between the Third Space and what she calls the Second Space. While the former refers to a poetics of “imperceptibility” where the notion of difference is dissolved, “reduced to an abstract, fluid line with no oppositional qualities” (4), the latter refers to a “Western postcolonial rhetoric” that still relies on the concept of difference to define and talk about otherness. Further quoting Orlando,

The Second Space promotes Western cultural theories that have become popular in our postcolonial era. These theories, although recognizing difference as a positive trait of multiculturalism, nevertheless continue to marginalize the Other by only allowing him or her to enjoy subjectivity in terms of difference [. . .]. Therefore, the Other remains stagnant, caught in the fixity of difference, still viewed as being in opposition to the West and its cultural values, history, and traditions. (168)

In the Second Space, the recognition of difference may very easily slip into an excuse for isolation. On a more concrete level, the 1990 Law of Difference in France, for instance, may be said to operate within

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the parameters of this Second Space where the difference of the Beur Other is defined simply by such *visible* markers as race, ethnicity, religion, language, dress, etc.

<sup>13</sup> Note the difference in spelling between Sebbar's protagonist, Shérazade, and that of *The Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade. The loss of the syllable "he" in the French transcription of the name, Donadey suggests, "is a perfect metaphor for France's assimilation policy with regard to immigrants," a policy that often views "the richness of cultural difference" as "unnecessary excess." Such a loss, however, "marks Shérazade as a cultural *métisse*," allowing her either to embrace or to reject her connection to her Oriental namesake, and this depending on whether her interlocutors are Arab or French (Donadey 133).

<sup>14</sup> Zahlner-Casmier's recent thesis, *Anti- and Auto-Exoticism in the Works of Three North African Women Writers*, shows how Maghrebian women writers, such as Assia Djebar, Leila Sebbar and Emna Belhaj Yahia, "reject traditional exoticism while at the same time, sometimes unwittingly, they borrow and pander to its more contemporary form" (17). For instance, Zahlner-Casmier argues that Leila Sebbar's "reliance on and overemphasis of the construct of *métissage*" as the visible marker of her Beur characters' exotic cultural difference sometimes implicate her in a kind of "auto-exoticism" that is complicit with the contemporary commodity culture she seeks to challenge. My argument in this chapter bears a greater nuance: what Zahlner-Casmier views as potential "play[ing] into the hands of a more contemporary exoticism" on the part of a number of marginal postcolonial writers (136) I view as an ineluctable modality of survival and negotiation where the markers of supposedly exotic cultural difference (skin color, clothes, customs, food, rituals, language, etc) become by necessity the very instruments of postexotic subversion within homogenizing metropolitan cultural economies. I am following here Anne Donadey's lead when she insists on the situatedness of postcolonialism (both as a field of theoretical practice and literary production) between oppositionality and complicity. Donadey argues that postcolonial literature "must, of necessity, account for its own complicity in structures of domination that are imperialist and patriarchal and that [it] often does so with unflinching honesty. [. . .] [P]ostcolonial literature positions itself in a to-and-fro movement *between the oppositional and the complicit*; it foregrounds oppositionality within complicity and complicity within oppositionality" (xxvi; emphasis in original). While postcolonial authors, such as Assia Djebar and Leila Sebbar, lay bare the legacies of the colonial enterprise and its Orientalist underpinnings, they also "underscore the impossibility of complete oppositionality in the postcolonial context." The articulation of inevitable ambivalence, Donadey insists, "is precisely what makes Djebar's and Sebbar's texts *postcolonial* rather than *anticolonial*" (107; emphasis in original). My chapter situates Sebbar's novel in neocolonial French commodity culture and argues that her postexotic mimicry of classical French Orientalism gestures toward the inherent ambivalence of postcolonial Maghrebian subjectivity.

<sup>15</sup> Loti is also the name Pierre Loti adopts for his protagonist in *Aziyadé*.

<sup>16</sup> French and English ships were sent to Turkey to contain the threat of a Russian invasion of the Balkan regions. For a detailed discussion of the correlation of colonialism and exoticism in Loti's *Aziyadé*, see Bongie, esp. 79-106. One of Bongie's main arguments is that the Loti-Aziyadé romance would not have been possible without its colonial background (79).

<sup>17</sup> *Pieds noirs* refers to French settlers in North Africa during the colonial period who were repatriated after decolonization.

<sup>18</sup> The first page reference is to the French text, whereas the second is to the English translation.

<sup>19</sup> According to Algerian historians' estimates, about 1.5 million Algerians lost their lives fighting for independence. Breaking out in the wake of the Indochina fiasco, this "One Million Martyrs War," as it is popularly referred to in Arab nationalist discourse, was to remain a controversial historical point of reference in the Franco-Algerian collective memory, at times dismissed as a mere "event" in the natural course of history and at others evoked as a major traumatic experience, the lasting political, socio-cultural and psychological effects of which dictate no less than a "state-sponsored ritual of mourning"

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(Begag and Chaouite 12; Dine 6-8). See Donadey's *Recasting Postcolonialism*, particularly Chapter One where she provides a comprehensive discussion of the long-lasting traumatic repercussions of the Algerian war, its controversial (under)representation in French historiography, and women's (often silenced) participation in it (1-18). Donadey's subsequent chapters focus on the works of two major Maghrebian women writers, Assia Djebar and Leila Sebbar, charting their female-oriented engagement with both the war experience and the legacies of French Orientalism.

<sup>20</sup> Sebbar was herself a first-hand witness of the liberation war, and her father's support for Algerian resistance fighters cost him six months of imprisonment (Zahlner-Casmier 8).

<sup>21</sup> France's post-1962 effort to erase "the traces of a war she had lost and her presence in Algeria" is reflected in the remarkable scarcity of published books dealing with the Algerian war, particularly of those produced by Franco-Algerian women writers (Stora 84).

<sup>22</sup> This is an error in the English translation; it should read "France."

<sup>23</sup> See Stora's article, where she describes this sense of post-war exoticist nostalgia for a quasi-Edenic pre-war Algeria experienced by many *pied-noir* women writers.

<sup>24</sup> ZUP is an acronym for "*Zone à urbaniser en priorité*," an Urban Priority Zone, designating temporary "prefabricated camps and foyers" built during the 1960s "in the vicinity of the bulldozed [Parisian] shantytowns in order to lodge the [immigrant] families while more permanent structures were being constructed in the municipalities" (Silverstein 92). This urban relocation project within "areas of heavy Algerian population," Silverstein contends, was in fact meant "to undermine the FLN's network in France" and "to rupture proto-ethnic solidarities considered potentially outside of the law" (92).

<sup>25</sup> Although Shérazade's green eyes indicate "the long history of *métissage* in the Maghreb between Berbers, Arabs, and Europeans" (Donadey 108), both Julien and the film director, ironically enough, see in them only the sign of an exotically "authentic" indigene.

<sup>26</sup> The phrase was sadly inspired by Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper when he qualified the July 2006 Israeli attacks on Southern Lebanon as "a measured response" to a prior offence. <http://www.canada.com/montrealgazette/news/story.html>. Retrieved 15 August 2006.

<sup>27</sup> In his seminal essay "The Politics of Recognition," Charles Taylor already spelled out the contradictory yet interconnected terms of this quandary: "With the politics of equal dignity, what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities; with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else" (Gutmann 38).

<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor summarizes the unavoidable conundrum that Humanities departments in North American universities face with regard to their multicultural curriculum, especially when this involves the question of who decides on what is canonical and what is not and which standards of judgment are used to make the decision:

Here is another severe problem with much of the politics of multiculturalism. The peremptory demand for favorable judgement of worth is paradoxically—perhaps one should stay tragically—homogenizing. For it implies that we already have the standards to make such judgements. The standards we have, however, are those of North Atlantic civilization. And so the judgement implicitly and unconsciously will cram the others into our categories. For instance, we will think of their "artists" as creating "works," which we then can include in our canon. By implicitly invoking our standards to judge all civilizations and cultures, the politics of difference can end up making everyone the same. (Gutmann 71)

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<sup>29</sup> Bissoondath rejects the “troublesome hyphen” in reference to Canada’s ethnic minorities as “a sign of an acceptable marginalization” and assimilates it within the supposedly more enabling and less divisive category of “Canadian” *tout court* (108-09).

<sup>30</sup> Graham Huggan takes Bissoondath to task for obscuring “the complicity of his [Bissoondath’s] ‘common sense’ views with the bogus universalism of the Canadian New Right” (141). Francesco Loriggio’s comments on the inflammatory, journalistically polemical style of *Selling Illusions* are unsparingly scathing. Because of its lack of analytical depth and theoretical sophistication, Loriggio writes,

the book never strays too far from the surface, and could as easily have been written by the average MP from the back benches or by the average neighborhood columnist. ... Out of the approximately one hundred and ninety quotations, over one hundred come from four Toronto and Montreal newspapers, the rest mostly from magazines or from novels. Not surprisingly, the press did not wait long to consecrate Bissoondath’s book ... spurring it on to the mild bestsellerdom it achieved. (qtd. in Huggan 141)

<sup>31</sup> The play’s title here refers to a mouth-shaped Egyptian hieroglyphic that the heroine, Pearl MacIsaac, discovers a few miles off the coast of Scotland during one of her archaeological digs in Edinburgh.

<sup>32</sup> I want to emphasize here that an “either/or” formula may implicate one in the same essentializing rhetoric one seeks to critique. Such rhetorical constructions should therefore be understood as signalling *a persistent tendency* in alterity discourses (both Western and non-Western) to use and thus perpetuate certain images and clichés.

<sup>33</sup> James Piper is reminiscent of Dr. Reid in *The Arab’s Mouth* who considers Victor MacIsaac’s effeminacy, penchant for the arts, and bouts of hysteria as genetic anomalies he inherited from his Catholic mother. On the other hand, his sister’s impressive scientific knowledge and her moral emancipation are attributed to the unusual (unnatural) strength of her paternal genes.

<sup>34</sup> The phrase “white but not quite” echoes that of Homi Bhabha’s “*almost the same, but not quite*” in reference to the concept of mimicry in colonial discourse. Mimicry, Bhabha argues, signals “a double articulation,” an inherent ambivalence, in colonial discourse where the colonial subject shifts between a concession of similarity and an upholding of superiority vis-à-vis the colonized (86). The colonized may imitate the colonizer, but only to a certain extent. He must remain slightly different from the colonizer; otherwise, the entire colonial enterprise loses its *raison d’être*. The colonial project perpetuates itself by adopting a discourse that “often speaks in a tongue that is forked, not false” (85). Because of this inherent ambivalence, Bhabha suggests, colonial discourse falters as an enunciator of difference. In the context of Canada’s multicultural state policy, one may argue that it is this official maintaining of partial semblance and measured difference that many critics of multiculturalism find disturbing.

<sup>35</sup> *Hejira* is Arabic for “migration,” originally designating the beginning of the Muslim calendar after the Prophet Mohammed fled persecution in Mecca, his birthplace, and sought refuge in Medina where he began his worldwide expansion of the Islamic faith. Pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca is considered by Muslims to be the highest fulfillment of their spiritual life. In the penultimate section in *Fall on Your Knees*, Lily and Kathleen can be said to be undertaking a personal diasporic *hejira* southward in search of a sense of fulfillment and self-discovery.

<sup>36</sup> Many Canadian- and American-born Arabs are ill at ease with the current usage of the term “host country,” for it suggests the obliging generosity of the host and the expected gratefulness and good behavior of the guest. For an overview of the racial classification patterns applied to the early Arab immigrants to North America, see Helen Hatab Samhan’s “Not Quite White: Race Classification and the Arab-American Experience,” in Suleiman.

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<sup>37</sup> As Hayani suggests, these restrictive immigration measures reflected official “concerns about ‘ethnic purity’ and the need to protect Canadians from the ‘grave consequences’ of having more Orientals come to Canada” (285). Worth noting is that North American racialized immigration policies imposed on “undesirable immigrants” during the early decades of the twentieth century drew their pseudo-scientific legitimacy from contemporary eugenicist discourse. The purported intellectual inferiority of certain immigrants and their offspring was frequently attributed to hereditary genetic deficiency. (To a certain extent, James Piper in MacDonald’s novel can be viewed as the mouthpiece of the complicity between the scientific discourse of eugenics and official immigration politics in early-twentieth-century Canada.) For general discussions of eugenics and immigration issues in North America, see Angus McLaren’s *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada 1885-1945* (1990), Ian Robert Dowbiggin’s *Keeping America Sane: Psychiatry and Eugenics in the United States and Canada, 1880-1940* (1997), and Audrey D. Cole’s *Genetic Discrimination: Looking Back to the Future?* (2001).

<sup>38</sup> For an overview of immigration patterns of Arabs to Canada from the early 1880s to the late 1990s, see Ibrahim Hayani’s “Arabs in Canada: Assimilation or Integration?” in Suleiman.

<sup>39</sup> In crisis situations, such as the Gulf War, the World Trade Center event, and the Iraq War, Arabs “have even hidden their ethnicity and denied their heritage in a bid to escape scrutiny” (Kashmeri 7).

<sup>40</sup> In “Arab-Canadian Youth in Immigrant Family Life,” Baha Abu-Laban and Sharon McIrvin Abu-Laban provide a revealing sociological analysis of identity issues among young Arab-Canadians and of the parent-youth tensions in many Arab-Canadian families. The results of an Edmonton survey, for instance, show the difficulties that young Arab-Canadians (particularly Christian females) face when it comes to dealing with their Arab “looks”:

Nearly four of ten respondents believe that strangers can determine that the respondents are of Arab origin just by looking at them. Ethnicity may be an asset or a liability. When it is perceived to be a liability, it is possible that the individual may wish to hide or camouflage it. The extent to which Arab-Canadian ethnicity is perceived to be a liability is reflected by responses to the following question: “Are there times when you try to hide your Arab-Canadian origin?” The results show that more females (three of ten) than males (one of ten) tried to hide their ethnicity, and within the female group, more Christian (44 percent) than Muslim (13 percent) tried to hide their Arab-Canadian identity. (149)

<sup>41</sup> I’m reversing here what Gershon Shaked describes, in a different context, as the “de-automatization of the stereotype,” referring to the defamiliarizing translational practice of assigning characters qualities and traits that are opposite to what is conventionally or prejudicially assigned them; for example, a generous Jew, a rational, cold-blooded Moor, a sexually inadequate Black African, and so on (14).

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of filmic Orientalism (particularly in *The Sheik*) in relation to female spectatorship and female consumerism during the 1910s and 1920s, see Miriam Hansen, “Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship”; Gaylyn Studlar, “‘Out-Salomeing Salome’: Dance, the New Woman, and Fan Magazine Orientalism,” in Bernstein and Studlar; and Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Era* (1996).

<sup>43</sup> Although not profoundly familiar with the text of the *Arabian Nights*, both Shérázade in *Shérázade* and Kathleen in *Fall on Your Knees* learn how to emphasize and de-emphasize, depending on their motives, their connection to the exotically inscrutable world of the Orient, a world created by the legendary fable itself and perpetuated by contemporary Western commodity culture.

<sup>44</sup> Rana Kabbani’s *Europe’s Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule* provides a detailed study of the history of Western translations of *The Arabian Nights*.

<sup>45</sup> According to Studlar, Hull’s controversial novel of the same name was scathingly “dismissed in the strongest terms by reviewers as a ‘cheap brand of fiction shocker for flappers’ and ‘salacious’ fantasy

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formulated to titillate the 'New Woman' and satisfy her prurient taste in literature" (Bernstein and Studlar 101).

<sup>46</sup> See Jack G. Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), where the author surveys Hollywood's (mis)representations of Arabs in about 900 films from the early silent movie era to today's mega-budget Blockbuster hits.

<sup>47</sup> MGM's 1965 *Harum Scarum* is not to be confused with Mermaid Comedies' 1932 film *Harem Scarem* or with Max and Dave Fleischer's 1928 *Harem Scarem*, the popular Ko-Ko and Fritz silent cartoon. What links these three movies, however, is their variations on such clichéd themes as the kidnapped harem maiden, the dancing *jaria* (female slave and entertainer), the ruthless Arab sheik, and the brave American. For synopses of the movies, see Shaheen 233-34.

<sup>48</sup> As Studlar suggests, what Shohat identifies as the rape and rescue motif in early Orientalist movies reflects eugenicist anxieties about ethnic purity particularly in the face of the continuing inflow of non-white immigrants to the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century (Bernstein and Studlar 100).

<sup>49</sup> The oriental harem in western discourse sometimes figures as the *locus* for an enabling female political agency as well as for the pursuit of secret lesbian relations. As Shohat and Stam argue, "Whereas Eurocentric discourse has defined the harem as simply a male-dominated space, a sign of 'oriental despotism,' other accounts have emphasized the harem as a privileged site of female interaction and even of Sapphic fantasy" (163). The works of Fatima Mernissi, Rana Kabbani and Lisa Lowe also emphasize the Oriental harem both as a discrete locale for the fulfillment of illicit relations and for historical and political action.

<sup>50</sup> McClintock here reads cross-dressing as "a historical [not only a Freudian] phenomenon" that "reveals the invented nature of social distinction, throwing into visibility the question of both the origins and the legitimacy of rank and power" (174).

<sup>51</sup> I am aware of the apparent anachronism in my use of the term multiculturalism; however, I use it here in order to describe an earlier form of cultural diversity that was encouraged (and controlled) by immigration regulations and citizenship rights and that will develop later into what we now refer to as state multiculturalism that has its institutions and state-sponsored programs. In this respect, MacDonald's novel is important because it fictionalizes a historical continuum along which questions of race, gender, minority culture, and national identity remain insufficiently historicized in discussions of multiculturalism today.

<sup>52</sup> For further discussions of "whiteness" as a space that resists categorization and visibility, see Mackey, Dyer, and Frankenberg.

<sup>53</sup> It is interesting to note here that while Kathleen enjoys the multicultural make-up of New York but still finds it a sexually repressive city, Mr. Mahmoud thinks that it is "the worst city in the world" not only because it houses many Jews and ("worse") many "coloured" men, but also because it is a decadent place "where people mate like mongrels" (MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees* 205).

<sup>54</sup> In this interview, MacDonald explains the motives behind her use of several foreign languages in her text. For instance, without cognitively internalizing the cultural and semiotic mechanisms of the Arabic text, the non-Arabophone reader is at least allowed to experience the warmth of its momentary manifestations:

I'm not interested in mystifying or stumping anybody. Any time I've used a word or a phrase in another language I've translated it either literally or implicitly. I've implied what the phrase must mean by the way in which it is responded to by the next character. It's very important to

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me that I don't send readers off to dictionaries too often—at least, foreign language dictionaries! So I try to allow the reader the experience of the intimacy of the mother tongue as well, by allowing them to understand what must have been said just now. I don't want them not to understand. I want them to take it for granted that the language changed, and that they got it, because three lines later, all was revealed. And that they were a part of it. It wasn't a language from another country that was being spoken in a kind of restaurant that you'd never dare drop into, or in a home, or at a baptism in another culture. It actually allows us to go into those places that are sealed off. (Lockhart 142)

<sup>55</sup> I use the concept “filiation” in its Saidian sense. Filiation (*Gemeinschaft*), according to Said, refers to “ties that an individual has with place and people that are based on his/her natal culture, that is, ties of biology and geography.” Affiliation (*Gesellschaft*), on the other hand, refers to ties with other “institutions, communities, and social creations” (*Culture and Imperialism* 26).

<sup>56</sup> MacDonald's conceptualization of language here conjures up that blissful experience of encountering a Barthesian “geno-text,” where an aporetic “writing aloud” is actualized: “*Writing aloud* is not phonological but phonetic; its aim is not the clarity of messages, the theatre of emotions; what it searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language” (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* 66-67; emphasis in original).

<sup>57</sup> Kristeva borrows the concept of the semiotic *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus* and uses it as the basis of her theory of signification in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), her original doctoral dissertation. For an overview of the controversies surrounding this concept and its currency in contemporary theories of language, see Margaroni.

<sup>58</sup> Romantic invocations of an Andalusian “Golden Age” are particularly persistent in Arabic *belles-lettres*. See Granara for an assessment of the uses of Andalusia as an idealized chronotope in the twentieth-century Arabic novel. Romanticized Andalusian topology is also a salient feature in modern Arabic poetry, especially in the works of Ahmed Shawqi, Nizar Quabbani, and Mahmoud Darwish. See Noorani, for instance, for an insightful discussion of Andalusian poetics in Ahmed Shawqi and Urdu-Persian Moahmmad Iqbal. Recent literary works that incorporate Andalusian themes and settings include, Lebanese Amin Maalouf's *Leo Africanus* (1994); Egyptian Radwa Ashur's *Granada Trilogy* (1994-95), the first part of which (*Granada*) was translated into English in 2003; Tariq Ali's *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (1993), the first novel of his *Islam Quartet* (1993-2005); Lewis Weinstein's *The Heretic* (2003); and Kevin Oderman's *Going* (2006).

<sup>59</sup> For critical re-readings of medieval Spain's *convivencia* culture, see Mann, Glick, and Dodds; Cohen; Lewis (*Cultures in Conflict*); Fletcher; and Menocal.

<sup>60</sup> This re-investment is evident in the publication of updated editions of anthologies of translated primary material and of numerous studies on the subject of Arab-Spanish culture and history. Such new editions include, but are not limited to, María Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin and Michael Sell, eds, *The Literature of al-Andalus* (Cambridge, 2006); Vivian B. Mann, Thomas F. Glick, and Jerrilyn D. Dodds, eds, *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims and Christians in Medieval Spain* (New York, 2007); Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (Berkeley, 2006); and Henry Kaman, *Golden Age Spain* (New York, 2005). The number of new post-9/11 publications on the subject of Andalusian cultural and political history cannot possibly be exhausted in the space of this note, but most notable are Gil Anidjar's “*Our Place in al-Andalus*”: *Kabbalah, Philosophy, Literature in Arab Jewish Letters* (Stanford, CA, 2002); Roger Collins and Anthony Goodman, eds, *Medieval Spain: Culture, Conflict and Coexistence* (New York, 2002); Joseph O'Callaghan's *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (Philadelphia, 2003); Chris Lowney's *A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain* (New York, 2005); Hugh Kennedy's *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest*

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*Dynasty* (Cambridge, 2005); James Reston Jr.'s *Dogs of God: Columbus, the Inquisition, and the Defeat of the Moors* (New York, 2005); and Giles Tremlett's *Ghosts of Spain: Travels Through Spain and its Silent Past* (New York, 2006). Salma Khadra Jayyusi's wide-ranging collection of essays, *The Legacy of Muslim Spain* (Leiden, 1992), published in commemoration of the quincentenary of the fall of Granada in 1492, remains a monumental contribution to the scholarly literature in English on the subject of Moorish Spain. More recently, the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the 2004 Madrid attacks in Spain explain in part this renewed interest in Arab Spain, for those attacks were perpetrated by a militant Arabo-Islamic faction bent on restoring, as it were, the purported lost glory of medieval Islam. For re-readings of Arab Spanish history in relation to the current discourse on global Islamic fundamentalism/terrorism, see Celso, Aidi, Ruggles, Anidjar ("Messianic terror"), and Gunther.

<sup>61</sup> I use the term "pessoptimism" in reference to Emile Habiby's satirical novel *The Secret Life of Saeed the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist* (1974), a well-known classic of modern Arabic literature the structure of which bears an uncanny resemblance to that of *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The novel tells the story of an Arab-turned-Israeli-informant who writes letters from prison to an anonymous recipient about the misfortunes wrought upon him by his own naiveté. Both Habiby's and Rushdie's eponymous protagonists are modern anti-heroes of sorts: gullible, candid, optimistic, agonizingly gestating autobiographers, but above all irredeemably *zogoybis* (unlucky), victimized by their changing political allegiances—like King Boabdil himself. The pessoptimism both novels display through the metaphor of death being transcended through the act of writing makes for an interesting parallel. Moreover, the utopian setting of a "Palimpstine" (Palestine) (226) which Aurora envisions in her paintings makes the parallel between the Hindu-Muslim conflict and the Israel-Palestine one even more compelling. More telling still is that Habiby, himself an "inside Palestinian," that is, one who chose to remain in Israeli territories after the 1947 Partition, earned prizes from both Israeli and Palestinian governments (the Israel Prize in 1986 and the Al Quds Prize from the PLO in 1990). If anything, and as Menocal suggests, Habiby's work and career stand as a testimony to the fact that the possibilities of an Andalusian intercultural model continue to reverberate down the ages and its present relevance has never been far below the surface (277). Another striking resemblance is also noted between Rushdie's book and Canadian author Jacqueline Dumas's *The Last Sigh* (1993). The latter tells the story of a young Canadian woman who travels to Granada, Spain, to investigate the mysterious disappearance of her lover. In the process, she finds out that her lover's Moorish-Jewish descent can be traced back not only to the 1492 fall of Granada, but to King Boabdil himself whose notorious sword has now come in the possession of her lover's family. For detailed comparison of the two books, see Gould.

<sup>62</sup> "I thought it was all right, this book, when I finished it," Rushdie explains, "I also thought that it finished something,—a kind of project which really I've been embarked on for 20 years, ever since I started writing *Midnight's Children*. [. . .] One of the things I like about the way this book turned out is I feel that it is not a child's view of India [as *Midnight's Children* is]. It is not a child's view of Bombay. I feel that Bombay in this book, the world of this book comes out of the grownup knowledge that I have of India and this world" (Reder 200). The connection between the two books is also evident in the reappearance of *Midnight's Children's* Adam Sinai as Adam Braganza in *The Moor's Last Sigh* whose entrepreneurial skills lead Abraham Zogoiby to adopt him as his own son.

<sup>63</sup> *Intifada* is Arabic for the Palestinian uprising of 1987 against Israeli occupation.

<sup>64</sup> In Rushdie's post-9/11 op-ed pieces, a shift has been noticed "from a recognizable liberal-left position" (as demonstrated in *Imaginary Homelands*) to a perceived pro-American stance characterized by its mainstream generalizations about Islam (as demonstrated in *Step Across This Line* as well as in several other articles appearing in such newspapers as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* [Sawhney and Sawhney 433]. See also Tariq Ali's scathing critique in the *Guardian* of leftwing literateurs, such as Salman Rushdie and Martin Amis, who have turned after September 11, 2001, into pro-U.S. "belligerati" operating within "the antechambers of the state department."

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<sup>65</sup> On the question of the secularizability of Islam, see Sadik Al-Azm's "Is Islam Secularizable?" and Lewis' *What Went Wrong?*, especially 96-116. For a more focused discussion of the collaboration between Western (mainly American) political strategists and secular Muslim intellectuals in institutionalizing a secular Islamic culture in pro-liberal Muslim countries, see Mahmoud, especially 330-35.

<sup>66</sup> Majid elucidates this via Bernard Lewis:

There is nothing [. . .] in Islamic history remotely comparable with such epoch-making Christian events as the Christological controversies, the schism of Photius, which split the Greek and Latin churches, the Reformation, the holy office of the Inquisition and the bloody religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries which in effect compelled Christians to secularize their states and societies in order to escape from the vicious circle of persecution and conflict. Muslims encountered no such problem and therefore required no such solution. (174)

<sup>67</sup> The consecration of an author, according to Pierre Bourdieu, takes place within a material field of cultural production where "the cultural businessman," that is, the art dealer or the publisher, legitimates that author's work "by putting it on the market, by exhibiting, publishing or staging it" (77). As such, the inherent value of a work of art becomes subtly intertwined with, and often obscured by, an external apparatus of publicity, promotion, and recognition. See Shumway for a discussion of the academic star system and its influence on the profession of literary studies.

<sup>68</sup> One of the Indian opposition MPs and a key participant in mounting the banning campaign in India wrote an open letter to Rushdie in which he dismisses the book's merit based on mere reviews of it:

Yes, I have not read it, nor do I intend to. I do not have to wade through a filthy drain to know what filth is. My first inadvertent step would tell me what I have stepped into. For me, the synopsis, the review, the excerpts, the opinions of those who had read it and your own gloatings were enough. (qtd. in Mufti 66)

<sup>69</sup> Since the fatwa, more than 267 articles have been published on Rushdie, with as many as 219 published between 1989 and 1993, when the fatwa affair was in full throttle. Moreover, "of the 11 dissertations devoted exclusively to Rushdie, only [Timothy] Brennan's was completed before the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, and several of the other 10 are devoted specifically to the controversy over the book" (Booker 6-7). Brennan's *Salman Rushdie and The Third World* was originally a dissertation he wrote in 1987.

<sup>70</sup> This is an excerpt of Rushdie's plea verbatim:

The point is this: Muslim culture has been very important to me, but it is not by any means the only shaping factor. I am a modern, and modernist, urban man, accepting uncertainty as the only constant, change as the only sure thing. I believe in no god, and have done so since I was a young adolescent [. . .].

To put it as simply as possible: *I am not a Muslim*. It feels bizarre, and wholly inappropriate, to be described as some sort of heretic after having lived my life as a secular, pluralist, eclectic man. [. . .] I do not accept the charge of blasphemy, because, as somebody says in *The Satanic Verses*, "where there is no belief, there is no blasphemy." I do not accept the charge of apostasy, because I have never in my adult life affirmed any belief, and what one has not affirmed one cannot be said to have apostasized from. (IH 404-05; emphasis in original)

<sup>71</sup> See Anouar for a comprehensive overview of responses by Arab intellectuals to the Fatwa.

<sup>72</sup> Benengeli is an allusion to Cite Hamete Benengeli, the fictional Arab author of *Don Quixote* which Miguel de Cervantes claims to have translated.

<sup>73</sup> Moraes's journey to Benengeli parallels the journey made by the Umayyad prince Abd al-Rahman from Damascus, then the seat of Muslim power, to Morocco and from there across the Strait of Gibraltar

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to Southern Spain. After the Abbasids took over Damascus in 750, slaughtering all the Umayyad princes and ruling the Muslim world thereafter for over five centuries (749-1258), Prince Abd al-Rahman was the “sole survivor” whose only choice was to flee westward and live in exile under Arab North African sovereignty. It took only six years for this young, half-Arab half-Berber, “assumed-dead Umayyad prince” to rally around him an army of Berbers disgruntled at their ill-treatment by their arrogant Arab overlords and to win a crucial battle against Cordoba’s Arab governor in 756. The invasion of Cordoba was an easy one, but it was decisive enough to reinstate the Umayyad dynasty on the fertile steppe of Hispania for the next seven centuries and thus to change for ever “the face of European history and culture” (Menocal 6-8). Just as the exilic *emir* (Prince) Abd al-Rahman leaves Damascus and rides west to restore and proclaim his family’s rightful rule from his palace in Cordoba, so Moraes leaves Bombay and flies to Benengeli to reclaim his mother’s stolen paintings and eventually preserve her memory through the story he writes while being held captive by Vasco Miranda. Moraes’s journey also symbolically retraces the entire geographical gamut of the Islamic Empire from its easternmost edges in India and China to its western reaches in Africa and Iberia. (Incidentally, the shape of the crescent, national emblem of many Islamic countries nowadays, reflects the geo-political trajectory of the Islamic Empire when it reached the zenith of its expansion by the mid-eighth century.)

<sup>74</sup> See my discussion of Leila Sebbar’s *Shérazade*, in Chapter One, where I read the heroine’s name against a centuries-old Orientalist imaginary. Just as the title *Shérazade* evokes the atmosphere of an *Arabian Nights*-inspired modern escapade, so the title *The Moor’s Last Sigh* suggests a nostalgic journey into the marvellous history of Andalusia. Rushdie had already shown interest in Arab Spain earlier in a short story, “Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate their Relationship (*Santa Fé, AD 1492*),” which he included in his *East, West* collection (1995). Arab-Islamic history is also evoked in the title of a “small project,” as Rushdie describes it compared to a “big adult book” like *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (Reder 200)—namely, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1991), a children’s collection of short stories whose eponymous hero is named after the Abbasid Caliph Haroun al-Rashid (786-809), a renowned patron of the arts and one of the characters in the *Arabian Nights* (Menocal 273-74; Hourani, *History* 196). Curiously, in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, Muslim characters are almost absent, except for “Scar,” Abraham Zogoiby’s gangster, and Abbas Ali Baig, a well-known cricketer whose public embrace with one of his female fans becomes the subject of one of Aurora’s most nationally acclaimed paintings.

<sup>75</sup> Huggan’s argument here echoes that of Brennan when the latter describes the dual function of cosmopolitan Third World writers:

They bridge the literary world’s Manichean spaces, and do so by exhibiting a political-aesthetic that is itself double. On the one hand, they satisfy the unwritten guidelines of metropolitan taste by supplying the market demand for novelty, either as exotica, political exposé or simple *Schadenfreude*. But just as importantly they also deviate from these guidelines by being deliberately pedagogic; by historicising current events without processing them in the manner of the media. (*Salman Rushdie* 38-39)

Brennan theorizes Third World cosmopolitanism in terms of Antonio Gramsci’s idea of a “national popular” literature where cosmopolitan cultural productions are ineradicably linked to the dialectic of class and nationality (42). Gramsci sees literature less as a conduit of a certain *zeitgeist* than as a “social institution with interventionary powers” in the ideological structures of society (43). The realm of the aesthetic in this sense draws its power and relevance from a specific social reality. For a critique of Brennan’s argument, see Aamir R. Mufti who reads the controversial development of the Rushdie affair less in terms of its Western cosmopolitan setting than in terms of “the cultural politics of contemporary ‘Islam’” (53). The Brennan-Mufti polemic over the Rushdie affair has now become a notorious case within the embattled field of Rushdie criticism.

<sup>76</sup> Rushdie’s concept of the palimpsest also applies to identity as a necessarily hybrid construct, a layering of multiple histories, origins, cultures, and languages that overwrite each other without any being wiped out completely. For a detailed discussion of this concept in the novel, see Coetzee and Greenberg.

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<sup>77</sup> The presence of Christopher Columbus at the 1492 capitulation ceremony to seek Queen Isabella's sponsorship for his voyages to the East also indicates the intersecting of two imperial narratives, that of Arab Islam in Europe and that of Europe in the New World (Schultheis 590-91).

<sup>78</sup> In France, Victor Hugo's *Hernani* (1830) and Theophile Gautier's *Voyage en Espagne* (1845) also popularized the idea of an exotic Spain (Lewis, *Cultures in Conflict* 52).

<sup>79</sup> Queen Aisha's harsh rebuke of her son's unmanliness has many verbal variations; I am citing here the one that Rushdie uses in *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

<sup>80</sup> The movie was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. The title also refers to Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927). An American historian and journalist, Mayo was notorious for her opposition to Indian self-rule, and her book reached a popularity in India that could only be surpassed by Rudyard Kipling's fiction (Kapur 25).

<sup>81</sup> In his earlier novel, *Shame*, Rushdie engages in a similar metafictional elaboration of what Simon During has identified as a persistent conflict between "the post-colonized" and "the post-colonizers" over historiographical legitimacy (460). Here is the oft-quoted dialogue between the narrator/author (post-colonizer) and the pseudo-interlocutor (post-colonized) as each claims entitlement to speech and narrative authority:

*Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! . . . I know: nobody ever arrested me. Nor are they ever likely to. Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?* I reply with more questions: Is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?

Can only the dead speak? (23; emphasis in original)

<sup>82</sup> See Laura Moss for a critical comparison of *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Moss notes that a scrutiny of Rushdie's "signature style" in these two books as well as in the previous ones reveals his attempt "to foster the myth of 'Rushdieland'" as inspired by that of García Márquez's "Garcíaaland" (123).

<sup>83</sup> Farhad B. Idris sees Abraham Zogoiby and his success in business "as representative of the rising class of bourgeois capitalists in postcolonial India." Drawing on Fanon's discussion of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Idris argues that "many of India's postindependence plights" are attributable to its "attempt at bourgeoisification" (155).

<sup>84</sup> In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie comments on the inherent paradox of the secular and the sacred "at the heart of the India-idea," namely, "that the ethic of the independence movement, and of the independent State, has always been secular; yet there can be few nations on earth in which religion plays a more direct or central role in the citizens' daily lives" (42-43). Also, in a speech he delivered in King's College Chapel, Cambridge, on the fourth anniversary of the fatwa, Rushdie re-emphasizes the crucial importance of maintaining this "strange paradox." In India, he states, "it was the secular ideal of Nehru and Gandhi that protected the nation's large Muslim minority, it is the decay of that ideal that leads directly to the bloody sectarian confrontations which the subcontinent is now witnessing [. . .]. Indian Muslims have always known the importance of secularism; it is from that experience that my own secularism springs" (*Step* 232).

<sup>85</sup> A telling anecdote has it that the original mosque structure was so magnificent that the Christian construction workers on many occasions dropped their tools refusing to modify it.

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<sup>86</sup> According to Bhabha, cultural diversity designates “the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs” which often “gives rise to notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity,” whereas cultural difference designates “the process of the *enunciation* of culture as ‘knowledgeable,’ authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification” (34; emphasis in original).

<sup>87</sup> Majid makes a similar argument when he suggests that hybridity and homelessness in postcolonial studies are transformed from symptoms of postcolonial trauma into abstracted universal virtues:

The search for universality has led theory to transform the catastrophe of homelessness, rootlessness, and just plain displacement into a virtue. Hybridity (the cause of so much trauma in the Third World) and syncretism are proposed as the best available models to dismantle the unproductive polarizations inherent in the totalizing narratives of difference (and which are necessary for a gradual emancipation). However, both conditions are effects of unequal global relations; their unthinking propagation risks becoming complicitous with the systemic violence inflicted on billions of people worldwide. (35)

<sup>88</sup> In *The Satanic Verses*, the art critic Zeeny Vakil is Rushdie’s spokesperson against the myth of authenticity and for cross-cultural hybridity: “She [Zeeny] was an art critic whose book on the confining myth of authenticity, that folkloristic straitjacket which she sought to replace by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism, for was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seemed to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest?” (52). In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, however, she reappears as Dr. Zeenat Vakil, “a brilliant art theorist and devotee of Aurora’s oeuvre,” researching the dialectic of eclecticism and authenticity for a book-length manuscript the title of which parodically evokes that of Bhabha’s well-known essay on hybridity, *Imperso-Nation and Dis/Semi/Nation: Dialogics of Eclecticism and Interrogations of Authenticity in A.Z.*” (329).

<sup>89</sup> I avail myself of this neologism to describe how Aurora’s and Rushdie’s Andalusian poetics inform their re-imagining of an Indian secular pluralism.

<sup>90</sup> Because of Uma Sarasvati’s machinations, Moraes is expelled from *Elephanta*, his parents’ household, and becomes one of Raman Fielding’s underworld “élite enforcers” (*Moor* 305).

<sup>91</sup> “Operation Bluestar” refers to what is known as the second Amritsar massacre in 1984, when Mrs. Gandhi sent her soldiers to the Golden Temple to force out Sikh militants who had taken possession of the holy shrine demanding the establishment of an autonomous Sikh state. The armed confrontation led to considerable human casualties, including the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi shortly afterwards by her two Sikh bodyguards (Metcalf and Metcalf 254). Rushdie’s essay “The Assassination of Indira Gandhi” in *Imaginary Homelands* provides a detailed critique of Mrs. Gandhi’s Emergency government and of the dynastic regime of the Gandhi family in general.

<sup>92</sup> Jaina C. Sanga offers a detailed discussion of this process of “chutnification” in *Midnight Children* as a metaphorical embodiment of “the hodgepodge associated with hybridity” (76).

<sup>93</sup> Bishnupriya Ghosh makes a similar argument. She claims that Rushdie’s use of culture specific codes challenges the potential recuperation of the postcolonial (India in this case) under the theoretical and descriptive umbrella of Western postmodernism. In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, more specifically, Rushdie’s hybridization of English, turning it into an “Indian vernacular,” is “an example of a situated cultural hybridity that disallows Western appropriations of the postcolonial into discourses of postmodernity” (130-31; emphasis in original).

<sup>94</sup> I avail myself here of Linda Hutcheon’s definition of postmodern parody as a form of cultural and narrative praxis that intervenes in the critical reconstruction of history in the present: “What I mean by ‘parody’ [. . .] is *not* the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of

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parody as repetition with critical similarity that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (26; emphasis in original). My argument therefore develops from within the overlapping terrain of Hutcheon’s definition of postmodern parody as both a citational *and* critical recuperation of history and Bhabha’s conceptualization of the postcolonial discourse of hybridity as an ambivalent site of repetition and difference.

<sup>95</sup> Moss also suggests that if *The Moor’s Last Sigh* appears to be less politicized than *Midnight’s Children*, it is because Moraes is not an agent of history, like Saleem, but rather “subject to its processes” (124). While Saleem “affects history,” Moraes is “affected” by it. “As a citizen of ‘Rushdieland,’” she adds, “Moraes is an ironic inversion of Saleem” (124; emphasis in original).

<sup>96</sup> To illustrate this kind of food-following research, one may imagine how hot red pepper, for instance, is cultivated by a Tunisian farmer in the Cap Bon region; it is then exported to Marseille, France, where it happens to be processed and canned by another immigrant (perhaps Tunisian) assembly line worker; and it ends up as a hot and thick *Harissa* in a LOEB store in Ottawa, Canada, where it is bought, not quite unexpectedly, by a Tunisian immigrant. In this case, the story of a spicy red pepper sauce is intricately bound up with the story of those transnational diasporic communities involved in its production and consumption. Incidentally, there is a website *Harissa.com*, where a virtual Tunisian Jewish community in particular may find not only information about *Harissa*-based recipes but also varied documentations regarding the history and habits of the Tunisian Jewish community. Carol Bardenstein remarks how food-based websites have now become “an active locus for collective articulation of affiliation and memory through food” (375). For food biographies, see Ian Cook, Philip Crang, and Mark Thorpe as well as Cook *et al.*

<sup>97</sup> One of the ultimate byproducts of such multifaceted and inverted Kristevan processes of abjection (eating, birthing, separating, vomiting, rejecting, and so on) is, of course, language *by* which and *in* which “the body of the undesirable alter ego” is symbolically subjected to the laws of regulated speech (Gunew, “Introduction” 152). For further discussions of cannibalism and exoticism, see also Root, Célestin, and Narayan.

<sup>98</sup> Abu-Jaber’s first novel, *Arabian Jazz* (1993), was the winner of the Oregon Book Award and a finalist for the National PEN/Hemingway Award. *Crescent* was awarded the 2004 PEN Center USA Award for Literary Fiction and the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award. Like *Crescent* and *The Language of Baklava*, *Arabian Jazz* also tackles the themes of Arab-American identity and the struggle of straddling two different cultures. While critically acclaimed as “the first mainstream novel about the Arab-American experience,” *Arabian Jazz* was scathingly criticized by some Arab-American critics for what they perceived as its historical inaccuracy; its depressing tone; and, above all, its perpetuation of stereotypes about Arabs (Abu-Jaber, *Language* 318-19).

<sup>99</sup> Mehta’s discussion of these two forms of “police presence” is compelling:

At the same time, this discussion of police presence in Nadia’s Café is a significant contrast to the CIA presence in the previous Egyptian-owned restaurant that forced the Egyptian owner out during the Gulf War. [. . .] The Egyptian man’s “Arabness,” determined by phenotype, skin color, and accent, contrasts with the light-skinned Europeanized features of Sirine and Um-Nadia to establish a racialized dichotomy between “unacceptable” male terrorism and “acceptable” female exoticism. This negating dualism reduces the Arab characters to fetishized commodities in a terror/seduction paradigm created by the racist gaze of the policemen and CIA agents. (254)

<sup>100</sup> Drawing on Adrienne Rich’s definition of “politics of location,” Caren Kaplan identifies the practical uses of such a concept and its significance within transnational feminist practice: “A transnational feminist politics of location in the best sense of these terms refers us to the model of coalition or, to borrow a term from Edward Said, to affiliation. As a practice of affiliation, a politics of location

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identifies the grounds for historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse and asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities, and possibilities of alliances” (138-39).

<sup>101</sup> Curiously, the manuscript of *Crescent* was submitted shortly before the World Trade Center attacks, and it was published in April 2003, shortly after the US-led invasion of Iraq. In the following, Abu-Jaber demystifies any perceived prescience in her book with regard to the events of September 11, 2001:

When I wrote the book, it was all pre-9/11. I never expected it was going to be published right when we were going to war with Iraq. I was so tired of the negative media portrayals—it seemed like it was constant. And I had just read an essay by Edward Said, too, about how the Arab was the last ethnicity that it was okay to denigrate and to be openly racist about. It really made an impact on me when I was writing *Crescent*. I was thinking about how that’s all we ever get—the idea of the terrorist. And I realized that people are so afraid of difference; they’re so afraid of people who look different or sound different. If there’s any social agenda in what I do, that is probably the number one thing: trying to counteract the media portrayals—the terrorist for the Arab man and the oppressed, hidden, exotic Arab woman. I talk about them in terms of diversity and humanity. I think the best way that comes through is by addressing vulnerability. (Abu-Jaber, “Interview” 219)

<sup>102</sup> Nadine Naber argues that the U.S. post-9/11 war-on-terror discourse implicitly uses the rubric “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” to designate those individuals who share “a wide range of signifiers such as particular names (e.g. Mohammed), dark skin, particular forms of dress (e.g. a headscarf or beard) and particular nations of origin (e.g. Iraq or Pakistan).” As such, the category “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” lumps together incongruous subcategories (such as Arabs and Iranians, including Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and all Muslims from the Muslim-majority countries, as well as persons who are perceived to be Arab, Middle Eastern, or Muslim, such as South Asians, including Sikhs and Hindus)” (278-79). The backlash of such discourse is disturbingly manifest in the public sphere, for instance, where “hate crime incidents following 9/11 throughout the U.S. disproportionately targeted Arabs and South Asians” (279, n.5)

<sup>103</sup> See Macfie, for a critical overview of discussions of T.E. Lawrence and *Lawrence of Arabia*.

<sup>104</sup> In October 2007, *Crescent* was banned from a school in Texas because of what the parents and the school principle perceived as offensive sexual content of four paragraphs (see pages 126, 156, and 252). See also Abu-Jaber’s response to the ban on her personal website at <http://www.dianaabujaber.com/banned.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Said is describing here a particular event with Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Iqbal Ahmed, two Pakistani exiles with whom Said was dining in a run-down restaurant in Beirut. In time, the two poets stopped translating their verses for Said and were lost in their own dream-like memories triggered by their encounter.

<sup>106</sup> Here I build on Dominick LaCapra’s distinction between absence and loss: while the former is understood as a “transhistorical” non-event that “does not imply tenses (past, present, future),” the latter is understood as an “historical event” that can “be reactivated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present and the future” (700).

<sup>107</sup> Cookbook memoirs are culinary autobiographies where food is used as the structuring principle of the narrative. The following is a strictly selective list of such autobiographies where food is invariably linked with colonial history, collective memory, and cultural identity: Sara Suleri, *Meatless Days* (1989); Aziz Shihab, *A Taste of Palestine: Menus and Memories* (1993); Fred Wah, *Diamond Grill* (1996); Elizabeth Ehrlich, *Miriam’s Kitchen: A Memoir* (1997); Judith Moore, *Never Eat your Heart Out* (1997); Linda Sawaya, *Alice’s Kitchen: My Grandmother Dalal and Mother Alice’s Traditional Lebanese Cooking* (1997); George Lang, *Nobody Knows the Truffles I’ve Seen* (1998); Theresa Lust, *Pass the Polenta and Other Writings from the Kitchen, With Recipes* (1998); Ruth Reichl, *Tender at the Bone: Growing up at*

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*the Table* (1998); Michael Lee West, *Consuming Passions: A Food-Obsessed Life* (1999); Colette Rossant, *Memories of a Lost Egypt: A Memoir with Recipes* (1999); Austin Clarke, *Pig Tails 'n Breadfruit: A Culinary Memoir* (2000); and Shoba Narayan, *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* (2004). It goes without saying that the proliferation of these food memoirs is intricately bound up with the global expansion of the food industry and the continuing commercialization of ethnic cuisines.

<sup>108</sup> Abu-Jaber's food memoir may be usefully connected to the recent proliferation of anthologies and collections of critical essays that are devoted to Arab women's autobiographies and that explore the ways in which the personal, the political and the historical in these autobiographies are intimately intertwined. See, for instance, Darraj, Faqir, Golley, Kadi, Ostle, and Reynolds.

<sup>109</sup> I also rely here on Deborah E. Reed-Danahay's definition of "the autoethnographer [as] a boundary-crosser," one whose texts combine three generic and disciplinary categories: "native anthropology," where the ethnic subject studies his or her own cultural community; "ethnic autobiography," where the life-narrative is produced by a member of an ethnic minority; and "autobiographical ethnography," where the ethnographic text is imbued with the anthropologist's personal experiences (2-3). See also my discussion of Pratt's definition of autoethnography in the Introduction.

<sup>110</sup> I shall be using "Diana" to refer to the character in the memoir and "Abu-Jaber" to the author herself.

<sup>111</sup> The term here, of course, is an ironic reference to the "Long War Against Terrorism" so much in use in North American media jargon and Intelligence reports.

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