Stung by a Charso-Bee:
Daljit Nagra's Macaronic *Ramayana*
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Abstract: This essay argues that Daljit Nagra's idiosyncratic adaptation of the *Ramayana*, in which he fuses multiple versions of the ancient epic (from different parts of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia), is more than just a comic version of the Sanskrit classic but represents a serious attempt to ensure an old text's relevance to a new readership. One way that Nagra manages to reach a highly diverse and widely dispersed audience is through his extensive use of interlingual wordplay, a technique that stylistically echoes the earlier diasporic writer Salman Rushdie. Reading this transnational version of the *Ramayana* through the lens of Jahan Ramazani's concept of a macaronic poetics, the essay analyzes the lexicological, phonological, and typographic effects of Nagra's poem, which combine to produce a faithful retelling of the ancient Hindu epic in a language and style that is thoroughly of the twenty-first century and uses translingual puns to connect the *Ramayana* to a Western audience as well as the Indian diaspora.

Keywords: Daljit Nagra, Ramayana, adaptation, code-switching, macaronic

I. Introduction

As A. K. Ramanujan writes in his seminal (and, to some, provocative[1]) essay "Three Hundred *Rāmayāṇas*," no Indian or South Asian ever reads the great Sanskrit epics "for the first time. The stories are there, 'always already'" (158).[2] In spite of—possibly because of—this pervasive narrative literacy,[3] recent years have seen a remarkable proliferation of ever

more retranslations, retellings, and refashionings of the *Ramayana*.[4] One remarkable specimen that deserves wider recognition—not least in the United States, where teachers requiring the text may have to plead with their university bookstores to order it—is Daljit Nagra's 2013 *Ramayana: A Retelling*, which renders the epic in his characteristically exuberant, verbally acrobatic, and typographically innovative style. As a celebrated second-generation Punjabi British poet, Nagra is aware of the delicate position from which he writes: "There's a burden of representation when writing about Indians, because poetry is consumed on the whole by white middle-class audiences" (qtd. in Chambers 93). As Gayatri Spivak points out, the knotty issue of representation always entails both the meaning "to depict" (*darstellen* in German) and "to speak for" (*vertreten* in German) (276). When it comes to his *Ramayana*, Nagra is thus burdened to both depict an epic that, as Ramanujan writes, comes in three hundred versions and speak for South Asians or Indians or Punjabis to a mostly white (and probably mostly British) audience.

I argue that Nagra's *Ramayana* tackles this difficult task by combining the postcolonially relevant themes of loss and recovery with a formal mastery of the kind of translingual wordplay known as "macaronic" (explained below). Thanks to the effects of this technique (both comic and serious), the Nagra *Ramayana*, which amalgamates multiple versions of the epic from different parts of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, is not blandly cosmopolitan but a vibrant hybrid text by a poet who is richly familiar (and fully at ease) with both the tradition of English poetry and a magnum opus of the Indian diaspora.

Echoing, and arguably building upon, some of the interlingual wordplay found in the works of the earlier diasporic writer Salman Rushdie (who himself benefited from G. V. Desani's formal innovations), Nagra brings the ancient Hindu epic to a diverse new audience, itself widely dispersed. In what follows, I make a case for reading Nagra's *Ramayana* through the lens of macaronic poetics by showing how this approach helps us to understand and appreciate the lexicological, phonological, and typographic effects of the poem.

II. Nagra in Context

Nagra's work first attracted wide attention with his 2007 collection *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, which, along with the follow-up volume *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!* (2011), was praised for the poet's sharply observed (or invented) argot that some critics call "Punglish"[5]—a dialect he forms by enriching his English verse with Punjabi words. Nagra, who speaks but does not write Punjabi (Barkham), "reclaims Punjabi Englishes as complex, creative media for poetry; and he asserts them as languages of contemporary Britain," as Rachel Gilmour puts it in one of her two articles which represent the most sustained critical engagement with Nagra's work to date ("Punning in Punglish" 690).

Nagra's *Ramayana* is, then, in one sense an epic of and for the Punjabi diaspora, inspired by the version he absorbed in his immigrant family. In his introduction to the text, he announces that he "cannot recall a time when [he] did not know about *Ramayana*" (ix), echoing critics like Ramanujan and Pankaj Mishra, before acknowledging his illiterate (but clearly narratively literate) grandmother's and mother's narrations of the Punjabi version in his family, via which he "was part of the first generation to be told the story in Britain" (ix). His semi-detached perspective on the epic is important; it makes his version "the product of a globalised Westernised writer who lives among many faiths and cultures and who seeks to represent voices from as many villages as possible with the same passion as the version [he] heard as a child" (ix). In other words, Nagra's *Ramayana* is not a faithful preservation of a family heirloom but a conscious expansion of its scope—like Walt Whitman, it contains multitudes: "In constructing my *Ramayana*, I tried to incorporate elements from as many versions as possible to enrich the narrative" (Nagra, *Ramayana* xi).

The expansion of the geographical scope of the text complicates any simplistic characterization of Nagra as a Punjabi poet or his version as a Punjabi *Ramayana*. As with other Punjabi diasporic art forms such as bhangra music or British Punjabi cinema, the South Asian element is but one ingredient among many in the book. In a sense, Nagra's *Ramayana*

is a continuation of the broadening scope that began with Vālmīki's original poem, in which Sugrīva commands his *vānaras* to search for the lost Sīta in all directions, referencing several place names even modern audiences can recognize (Venkatesananda, *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa* 40–43). Thus the poem involves not only the North Indian heartland in and around Rama's birthplace of Ayodhya but much of the subcontinent. Nagra's retelling expands the scope of the narrative beyond the subcontinent to Southeast Asia as well as his native England, to whose poetic traditions he is indebted. As his eclectic early nom-de-plume Khan Singh Kumar suggests, Nagra refuses to be straightjacketed into a single tradition.[6] Notwithstanding some of the Punglishisms discussed below, it may therefore be more fitting to read his poem as a broadly diasporic one in the tradition of Derek Walcott's Homer-inspired epic *Omeros* or Patience Agbabi's Chaucer adaptation *Telling Tales* (and the related *Refugee Tales* project) rather than as a narrowly Punjabi Ramayana.

III. A Poetics for Puns

Indeed, Nagra is a perfect example of why "the paradigm of distinct national literatures, coherently transmitted, proves ill-suited to the powerfully intercultural dynamics of twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry," as Jahan Ramazani argues in *Transnational Poetics* (41). "[P]oetic transnationalism," he adds, "can help us both to understand a world in which cultural boundaries are permeable and read ourselves as imaginative citizens of worlds that ceaselessly overlap, intersect, and converge" (49).[7] In Nagra's work, a key vehicle for crossing such cultural boundaries is the humble pun, that ill-reputed and occasionally groan-inducing play on words that may have led to the apophthegm "he who would pun would pick a pocket," a phrase that has been attributed to assorted eighteenth-century wits. The exasperated claim illustrates the low reputation of puns by comparing their perpetrators to thieves—little could the unspecified aphoristician have known that T. S. Eliot would improve the image of literary pickpocketing with his observation that "[i]mmature poets imitate," whereas "mature poets steal" ("from 'Philip Massinger'" 153).

All joking aside, puns matter, and Ramazani goes some way toward explaining how and why in his book *The Hybrid Muse* (2001): "Theorists indicate that puns share with irony in a 'simultaneity' and 'superimposition of meanings.' Puns can be conceived in terms of a 'homonymic collision,' in which 'the messages converge and clash in an irresolvable dislocation of meaning.' Such a description of colliding, clashing, dislocated meanings is especially evocative in the postcolonial context" (119). In this case, Ramazani is discussing a poem by Louise Bennett, whose work exploits the tension and slippage created by code-switching between Standard English and Jamaican patois. For his part, Nagra not only switches among different poetic forms, tones, and dialects but also between different languages.[8] In the South Asian context, Binoo John argues—half-facetiously—that the use of Indian-English is an invaluable device for "capturing the Indian experience" (183). Or, in the words of Richard Lederer: "A bilingual pun is twice the fun." The infamous *Peccavi* attributed to General Napier is the first-person perfect form of the Latin verb *peccare*, which means "I have sinned"—and Napier had, for he had conquered the Sindh province after defeating the Talpur Emirs at the Battle of Hyderabad in 1843. This may not be the sort of example Harish Trivedi has in mind when he argues that "playful interlingual wit is of course one of the more delightful justifications for code-mixing, especially in literature" (Foreword xxiv). Nevertheless, the examples from Nagra's *Ramayana* I discuss below illustrate many of the powerful effects of macaronic poetics. Macaronic poetry is no recent invention: the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) definition of "macaronic" as "a burlesque form of verse in which vernacular words are introduced into the context of another language (originally and chiefly Latin)" notes 1517 as its first mention. Ramazani's 2015 essay on macaronic poetics covers many of the aspects relevant to my reading, including typographic eclecticism (even though Nagra's may not be as radical a leap as Ezra Pound's) (Ramazani, "Code-Switching" 35). While his article does not address Nagra's *Ramayana*, Ramazani does mention the "robustly humorous expressions and translingual puns" in the poet's earlier work (37). Of course, whether or not something is humorous is a highly

subjective matter. Ramazani notes that, "[l]ike any other linguistic or poetic resource—parataxis and hypotaxis, rhyme and enjambment, alliteration and assonance—code-switching can be used poorly or deftly, in a way that is tired or fresh, hackneyed or vivifying" (31). Wordplay is perhaps especially a matter of taste, and what is an epigrammatic witticism to one may be a wince-worthy pun to another. Nevertheless, "[a] macaronic poetics foregrounds the always-already dialogic nature of even the supposedly unitary poetic voice" (40). And while all readers need to judge for themselves how vivifying they find Nagra's interlingual poetry, Ramazani is surely correct in claiming that

> [i]n a global age of increased human mobility and cross-cultural contact, code-switching is one of poetry's most visible and audible ways of giving shape and meaning to the convergences of peoples, texts, and cultures across sometimes-large cultural and social distances. Poets intercept, reshape, and torque our multilects and in doing so help bring new interlingual forms into the world. (40)

IV. Nagra's Macaronic Poetics

How, then, does Nagra's *Ramayana* macaronically "torque our multilects"? I identify three ways: through the words he chooses and the way he uses them (lexicology), through the way he exploits how languages differ in terms of their speech sounds (phonology), and by exploiting the considerable leeway that exists when transcribing and transliterating foreign words into English (typography).

Determined to make his version "as alive as possible and have linguistic depth," Nagra purposefully includes a wide range of linguistic registers, from the *OED* and the Anglo-Indian *Hobson-Jobson* glossary to contemporary American and Australian slang ("Retelling"). In addition to the lexicological wealth provided by many different varieties of English, then, the text also includes words from other languages, chiefly but not exclusively from the Indian subcontinent. This means that Nagra's *Ramayana* is not the kind of work by a second-generation immigrant author that might be easily accessible to members of either

an ancestral culture or the author's current country of residence. Instead, it demands (or encourages) an international and multilingual awareness few readers can fairly be expected to have.

Obviously, Nagra is not the first South Asian diasporic author to enrich the English language with playful neologisms and interlingual puns. Words that are "like arrows: unpullbackable" or "unpluckable" (*Ramayana* 26)[9] are reminiscent of the kinds of neologisms Rushdie devised when he worked on an advertising campaign for Aero chocolate bars, such as "[i]rresistibubble" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* xi). In Rushdie's work, wordplay often takes place in the interstitial space between two languages—what Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin call "interlanguage" (66–68). For instance, a character in *Midnight's Children* (another text that contains multitudes) declares that "[t]hese chatterjees won't do any more of their tittling and tattling from now on" (Rushdie 25), a play on the English onomatopoetic verb "chatter" and a common Bengali family name.

The precedent of Rushdie, a famously secular Muslim, culturally appropriating the other great Hindu epic the *Mahabharata* in his *Midnight's Children* may thus have paved the way for Nagra, a secular Sikh ("My Ramayana"),[10] to retell the *Ramayana*. Notwithstanding Nagra's tireless campaign for poetry (what he terms "an espresso shot of thought" [qtd. in Armitstead]) and generally low opinion of Rushdie's far more lucrative genre (his answer to an *India Today* question that asked him "Which books/writers are overrated?" was "Most novelists" [Nagra, "Novelists Are Overrated"]), Sir Salman's antecedence goes further than a mere shared passion for punniness.[11]

In one of his most notorious puns, another Rushdie character offers a pseudo-etymological self-description: "*Bastard*. I like the sound of that word. *Baas*, a smell, a stinky-poo. *Turd*, no translation required. Ergo, *Bastard*, a smelly shit; like, for example, me" (*The Moor's Last Sigh* 104; emphasis in original). Apart from the jejune scatological revelry, the macaronic wordplay, which combines English and Hindi, eloquently articulates Rushdie's by-now familiar defense of impurity and celebration of cultural hybridity. Nagra is similarly enthusiastic in both eschewing cultural purity and practicing literary scatology.

Additionally, *Midnight's Children* might also serve as an example for its aggressive unconcern with what Rushdie dismisses as "the bogy of Authenticity" (*Imaginary Homelands* 67). Ironically, his (occasionally erroneous) use of Hindi has been criticized by Hindiphone scholars such as Trivedi, who accuses Rushdie of "us[ing] the small change of a few Hindi words to authenticate himself in the eyes of his Western readers, for he knows these words and they do not—and never mind that they do not know just how little he knows of Hindi or indeed of India" (Foreword xvii).[12] In other words, what signifies authenticity to some readers proves its absence to others, an ironic situation considering Rushdie so forcefully claims to be uninterested in it.

The sensitive issue of culturally appropriating a sacred Hindu text is doubly relevant to *Midnight's Children* because the novel's Anglo-Indian Hindu-descended but Muslim-raised narrator likens his narrative position to that of Ganesh taking dictation, though not from Vyasa, the legendary author of the *Mahabharata*, but from Valmiki, the author of the *Ramayana* (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 170). Rushdie's blithe disregard for accuracy probably exceeds Nagra's, but his novel (whose "errata" he later addressed[13]) may have expanded the possibilities of what seems permissible for his literary descendant, including the odd "error."

Beyond word choice, Nagra macaronically avails himself of (or simply avails, according to the subcontinental non-reflexive use of the verb) the phonological differences between English and South Asian languages like Hindi and Punjabi. As is well known, the English language treats the voiced labiodental fricative [v] and the voiced labio-velar approximant [w] as separate phonemes, which can be a challenge to many non-native speakers of English (and explains why German interrogators invariably warn that "ve haf vays of making you talk"). By contrast, [v] and [w] are allophones in Hindustani—that is, they are alternative pronunciations of the same phoneme. When Nagra imagines how the drunken debauchery at Raavana's court might look to "Vishnu well-wishers" (*Ramayana* 105), pronouncing this quick succession of [v] and [w] might be tricky for even the nimblest native speaker, but it is likely to produce some comical effects when tackled by a reader less used to awarding phoneme status to the two sounds.

Apart from lexicological and phonological ways of "torqu[ing] our multilects," many of Nagra's macaronic effects stem from the friction between writing and speech, which Gilmour addresses in her work on Nagra's writing ("Doing Voices" 355) by using Garrett Stewart's distinction between "graphotext" and "phonotext" (Stewart 28). The difference between what is written or read and what is spoken or heard acquires an additional urgency when a text incorporates words from languages that use different writing systems.

The terms "transcription" and "transliteration" are sometimes used interchangeably to describe this process (which, in the case of words rendered into the Latin script commonly used for English and many other languages, also goes by "romanization"). Even the *OED* acknowledges the occasional synonymous usage of "transcribe" and "transliterate," although other definitions include more precise meanings. For example, David Crystal defines transliteration as "the conversion of one writing system into another"; he notes that it "needs to be distinguished from transcription, in which the sounds of the source word are conveyed by letters in their target language" ("transliteration"). Confusingly, Crystal's emphasis on sounds in transcription as opposed to spelling in transliteration is diametrically opposed to the *OED*'s distinction. Whether we follow the venerable *OED* or the one-man linguistic industry that is Crystal is less important than the actual distinction itself, which can be mapped onto Stewart's graphotext/phonotext binary and productively employed to explore the macaronic poetics of Nagra's *Ramayana*.

Whereas the phonotext of "arsoora and raksassy" is recognizably similar to the more pedantic transcription "ásura and *rākṣasī*," Nagra's cheeky rendering of the Sanskrit words असुर and राक्षसी results in a significantly altered graphotext and allows him and his readers to indulge in some mildly puerile humor premised on the proximity of "arse" (what Americans call "ass") and "sassy" (an American variation of "saucy"). Not so much his listeners, though, as the joke, such as it is, depends on the difference between phonotext and graphotext.

Nagra proceeds to sprinkle the unappetizing contents of the demons' vats onto the following page like a middle-schooler who has just discovered Microsoft Word's font library and selected hilariously inappropriate

typefaces such as Lucida Blackletter for "spleens" and Country Western SC for "gore galore!" (*Ramayana* 45). These typographic flourishes, combined with italicized passages, indentations, and phonetic spelling variations ("*fiiiieeeendd*" [44]) not only account for some of the particular anarchic charm of Nagra's version but also sharpen the reader's eye for textual detail. Another phonetically and typographically foregrounded word is "*haramzada*" (44), the Hindustani (and originally Persian) word for "bastard" in both senses of the term.

Unlike in his earlier books, each of which included a glossary to help his monolingual readers fully appreciate the linguistic depth of his work (entitled "Punjabi to Ungreji Guide" in *Dover* and "Bolly Bhaji" in *Tippoo*), Nagra does not furnish his *Ramayana* with such an apparatus. While his retelling contains a list of characters, the absence of a glossary means that some of the poem's jokes may be opaque to exclusively Anglophone readers. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin observe in *The Empire Writes Back*, refusing to gloss certain untranslated words is a key strategy of appropriation in postcolonial writing, which "not only registers a sense of cultural distinctiveness but forces the reader into an active engagement with the horizons of the culture in which these terms have meaning" (65). Thus readers who, unlike Nagra, are not proficient in a South Asian language are frequently reminded of their own knowledge gaps and of the cultural distance between themselves and a poem which is simultaneously very English and very exotic. At the same time, because of Nagra's effort to go well beyond the Indian versions of the epic, even readers well-versed in Valmīki or Tulsidas, the author of a popular Hindi rendering, may be baffled by a Diwali featuring dancers wearing Thai Khon masks performing "the Cak dance" (Nagra, *Ramayana* 318), a reference to *Kecak*, a Hindu performing art "[k]nown to the Western world as the 'Monkey Dance'" that developed in Bali in the 1930s (Dibia and Ballinger 92). Such moments are another reason why it is misleading or at least reductive to refer to Naga's version as a Punjabi or even Punglish *Ramayana*.

In his essay on macaronic poetics, Ramazani shows how punning mistranslations can create an effect of "interlingual chiming" ("Code-Switching" 35) that results from two languages jostling against one

another. In Nagra's case, such comic mistranslation is intensified by the added dimension of transcription. Book Third of his *Ramayana* ("Spick-Span Sylvan Exile") includes an entry from Sita's diary in which she enthuses about her shared forest exile and remembers Rama using "a word from his region, 'cushy' which he told me means 'joyous'" (Nagra 124). This word, which she employs five more times over the next seven lines, is of course the Persian-derived *khuśī*, meaning happiness in Hindi (खुशी), Punjabi (ਖੁਸ਼ੀ), and several other Indo-Aryan languages. However, Nagra does not follow an international standard for romanizing an Indic script like ISO 15919 or the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) and thereby puns with the English adjective "cushy," which, although it entered the language as a borrowing of the same related Urdu and Persian words, has developed a slightly narrower meaning of a "cushy job" or even (in American English), "perhaps partly by association with cushion," something that is pleasantly "[s]oft and spongy to the touch" ("cushy, adj."). Thus, in a single loosely transliterated word and by once again exploiting the tension between graphotext and phonotext, Nagra manages to cross three centuries and as many continents.

Later in the same book, when Sita is tempted by the Raavana to cross the Lakshman Rekha, the disguised demon king sings his own praises:

> 'I am here to adore the omniscient ultimate: the
>   **chuckerbutty!**
> He, with ten astounding heads, cornucopias life.
>   Have you not felt the chuckerbutty?' (Nagra, *Ramayana*
> 160; emphasis in original)

While there are many possible romanizations of the Sanskrit word चक्रवर्ति (*cakravarti*), which means "world ruler," including Chakravarty (as in Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak) and Chakraborty (as in the actor Mithun Chakraborty), only "chuckerbutty" (the transcription used by the Anglo-Indian composer and organist Oliphant Chuckerbutty) roughly echoes chukar partridge (*Alectoris chukar*), a symbol of unrequited love in much of South Asia. In fact, the *Rāmcaritmānas*, Tulsidas' late sixteenth-century Hindi *Ramayana*, contains several references to the bird.[14]

In the final section of Nagra's retelling, a sub-chapter about Raavana's traitorous Vibishana (the virtuous demon) bears the title "The Dooshman Within." "Dooshman" is, to put it mildly, a highly irregular romanization of the Persian-derived word for "enemy" used in many South Asian languages, including Hindi (दुश्मन), Urdu (دشمن), and Punjabi (ਦੁਸ਼ਮਣ). So why not use *duśman*, which would have aided English-only readers in correctly pronouncing the word's first syllable with the short near-close back rounded vowel—/ʊ/ in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Presumably in part because Nagra is fond of old-timey spellings, as his collection on Tipu—*Tippoo*—Sultan demonstrates.[15] Another factor, however, may be that the considerably increased likelihood for mispronunciations made possible by the "oo" spelling is welcome precisely because it expands the text's capacity for interlingual chiming and thus its macaronic potential. For one thing, we are dealing with a target language (English) in which the digraph "oo" can be pronounced in any number of ways ("moon," "book," "door," "blood," etc.). For another, given the poet's well-documented predilection for scatological humor, we cannot entirely rule out that this is a macaronic pun premised on the homophony of the first syllable of the misleading "dooshman" romanization (though not of *duśman*) and the popular American slang term "douche" or "douchebag," based on the feminine hygiene product and used to describe (according to the *OED*) "[a] stupid, obnoxious, or contemptible person; a person who behaves despicably" ("douche, n."), which, from Raavana's perspective, fits his wayward brother quite admirably. The manifold vowels suggested by the double-o spelling Nagra selects, then, allow for a humorous effect based on a (deliberately) erroneous transliteration.

V. A Macaronic Ahalya

Arguably the most elaborate example of macaronic poetry in the entire poem occurs in Nagra's version of the Ahalya episode, which tells the story of Sage Gautama's wife, who is seduced by Indra, cursed by her husband, and only liberated by the young Rama's appearance. As it happens, the Ahalya passage also constitutes an important section of the famous "Three Hundred *Rāmayāṇas*" essay, in which Ramanujan

examines some of the differences between Vālmīki's and Kampaṉ's versions of the epic (134–44). In Kampaṉ's Tamil *Irāmāvatāram* (the basis for R. K. Narayan's well-known version), Gautama's punishment of the lecherous Indra is rather more inventive: whereas Vālmīki's Indra merely loses his testicles (Venkatesananda, *Bāla Kāṇḍa* 48–49), Kampaṉ has him covered, in P. S. Sundaram's delicate translation, with "[a] thousand *pudenda*" (Sundaram 24). Narayan turns those into "a thousand female marks" (20), and Nagra into an unspecified number of "rude-appearing slits" (51).[16]

Another difference is that Vālmīki's Ahalya does not get to protest her irate husband's harsh punishment, which is to live on air and lie on ashes, invisible, until Rama appears to restore her purity. By contrast, Kampaṉ's Ahalya is condemned to turn to stone, yet before her petrification is complete, she begs for mercy and secures the crucial escape clause that Rama's magic touch will one day awaken her from her lithic state. Slightly mollified, Gautama predicts that "Rāma / will come, wearing garlands that bring / the hum of bees with them" (qtd. in Ramanujan 140). Although those bees do not make it into Narayan's adaptation of Kampaṉ's *Irāmāvatāram*, a single specimen reappears in Nagra's version when Ahalya's desperate plea for mercy leads Gautama to doubt his wife's guilt: "Gautama sensed he may have been stung / By a charso-bee, poked by a hornswoggle: in short, duped!" (52). Here, at last, then, is the mysterious charso-bee promised in this article's title—but what does it mean to be stung by such an insect?[17] For one thing, most bees do not live singly but socially, in colonies. Furthermore, the plural is much more meaningful to Hindi speakers, as चार सौ बीस (*chaar sau bees*) simply means 420. The charso-bee is thus not the product of some Rigvedic hymenopterous engineering but of Nagra's early twenty-first-century macaronic poetics, which turns a Hindi numeral into an English insect. As for the significance of the number 420, the *OED* is, for once, unhelpful, as its definition (that "420" is a North American slang term for marijuana) makes little sense here. Instead, Nagra is referring to the Indian meaning of the number—cheat, fraud, and confidence trickster—which originated in the colonial-era Indian Penal Code and continues to be the number of the relevant section today

(*Indian Penal Code*). To return to Rushdie, "420 has been, since time immemorial, the number associated with fraud, deception and trickery" (*Midnight's Children* 225), and Nagra's Gautama, who seems thoroughly plugged into Indian legal texts and/or popular culture, views the god Indra in those terms. Remarkably, *Midnight's Children* is not the only Rushdie novel wherein the number pops up with considerable frequency[18]—*The Satanic Verses* famously begins with the explosion of Air India flight 420 (4), upon which Rushdie's soon-to-be-angelic protagonist Gibreel Farishta breaks out into song. And what does he sing? An English translation of "Mera Joota Hai Japani," the signature song from the Raj Kapoor film *Shree 420* (5), in which Kapoor's Everyman protagonist, who is torn between the glamorous Maya (Hindi for "illusion") and the dutiful Vidya ("knowledge"), engages in some mild trickery before appealing to virtues like hard work and honesty. The song, which asserts the singer's Indian heart—notwithstanding his Japanese footwear, English trousers, and Russian headgear—is an apt soundtrack to what is arguably one of the great novels of migration. Bollywood films are of course enjoyed well beyond their country of origin, and their consumption constitutes an important way for the South Asian diaspora to remain connected to the homeland, the *desh*, not least because of its promise of preserving some cultural essence even when clothed in foreign garb and perhaps living, as Nathaniel Hawthorne (and more recently Jhumpa Lahiri) put it, on unaccustomed earth.[19] This is presumably why the song also makes an appearance in Mira Nair's film *Mississippi Masala*, in which we hear it when an Indo-Ugandan woman's record player is confiscated by Ugandan security forces. Hence Nagra's "charso-bee" is more than just an especially elaborate interlingual pun that invites part of his audience to share in an inside joke—although obviously it is that, too. It is a macaronic metaphor that allows a British Punjabi poet to claim a cultural connection both to the land and culture of his ancestors and to the other far-flung members of the South Asian diaspora by referencing a touchstone text of shared popular culture—in Ramazani's terms, "giving shape and meaning to the convergences of peoples, texts, and cultures across sometimes-large cultural and social distances" ("Code-Switching" 40). With his cryptozoological

bee in particular and his macaronic *Ramayana* more broadly, Nagra thus creates a multilayered text that weaves together languages, generations, communities, and continents.

VI. Conclusion

After more than three hundred pages' worth of maximalist hyperactive verbal pyrotechnics and zany energy, after administering to his readers an intoxicating spice mélange that, like Frank Herbert's fictitious drug, heightens consumers' awareness, Nagra concludes his retelling with the reunited couple praying for peace, an uncharacteristically somber note that foregrounds some of the epic's pathos instead of merely trivializing it:

> Rama by Sita side by side
> unable to move or utter aught
> save all now and evermore praying
> *Shanti!*   *Shanti!*   *Shanti!* (330)

And yet, even this contains more than meets the eye: "The whole of my version was written for the last two chapters," Nagra reveals in an interview, elaborating that "[t]here are also two or three dramatic things about my version's ending, which define my background as an Indian in Britain" ("Retelling"). In part, this may refer to his choice to end the text with the image of the married couple as a separate unit instead of embedded in the intrigues of an extended family and court life back in Ayodhya. However, many readers of modern English poetry cannot help but think of another long poem that concludes with the *Upanishads*' Shanti Mantra, Eliot's *The Waste Land*. We know from that poem's facsimile edition that Eliot's working title was *HE DO THE POLICE IN DIFFERENT VOICES* (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 4), a quotation from Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*. Nagra's *Ramayana* may not feature any law enforcement officers, but he most certainly *do* his more than fifty named characters in as many different voices. Thus it is perhaps only fitting that the book was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize. Nagra's intimate familiarity with the English poetic tradition—including poets like Eliot, who, unlike Nagra, were immigrants—has long

been established. And while *British Museum*, his first post-*Ramayana* collection, is slightly less flippant and somewhat more sober than his previous work, poems like "He Do the Foreign Voices" show his continuing commitment to a polyvocal commentary on the world in which he lives—in this case, post-Brexit Britain. And in "Meditations on the British Museum," the long poem that concludes the volume, he even considers multiple possible contemporary avatars of Raavana's virtuous but traitorous brother: "Are today's Vibishanas Manning, Snowden, Assange?" (Nagra, *British Museum* 52). Such lines suggest that, even though Nagra's *Ramayana* project might be completed, the epic's manifold moral lessons continue to resonate in the poet's mind, just as its memorable wordplay is likely to in that of his reader.

Toward the end of "Three Hundred *Rāmayāṇas*," Ramanujan writes that "the cultural area in which *Rāmāyaṇas* are endemic has a pool of signifiers (like a gene pool), signifiers that include plots, characters, names, geography, incidents, and relationships" (157–58). Given the multiple influences of Nagra's retelling as well as his potentially global but (according to him) primarily white middle-class audience, it remains to be seen whether the cultural area Ramanujan discusses has expanded sufficiently for its pool-full of signifiers to do their macaronic work without being too diluted. One thing, however, is certain: Nagra has put the pun in Punjabi.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 In 2011, the article was dropped from the curriculum at Delhi University due to pressure from right-wing Hindu students (Biswas). Thus far, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has not weighed in on Nagra's *Ramayana*, but then again, Hariharan points out that the right wing are "slow readers all" (20).

2 Mishra uses a very similar phrase in his introduction to the 2006 reissue of the Penguin Classics edition of Narayan's version of the epic: "I can't remember a time when I did not know it" (viii).

3 I am borrowing this concept from Arshia Sattar, who used it in a 2010 episode of WBUR's *On Point* ("India's Epics, Ancient and Modern").

4 Examples include films (such as Ratnam's *Raavan* and *Raavanan*), illustrated versions (such as Chopra and Kapur's *Ramayan 3392 A.D.* series or Patel's *Ramayana: Divine Loophole* picture book), hard-boiled novels (such as Arni's *The Missing Queen*) and speculative fiction (see Menon and Singh's anthology *Breaking the Bow*).

5 See, for example, Hena (122). For a novel-length experiment in Punglish, see Malkani's *Londonstani* (2006), which grew out of his university dissertation about British-Asian youth culture.

6 Nagra's choice of pseudonym may have been inspired by the early twentieth-century Punjabi revolutionary Udam Singh, who gave himself the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh name Ram Mohammad Singh Azad while in custody, thus expressing a pan-Punjabi unity and shared desire to be free (the meaning of *azad* in Persian and many Indo-Aryan languages) (Mir 2–3). A more recent example of ecumenical onomastics is Ram Mohammad Thomas, the Hindu-Muslim-Christian protagonist of Swarup's novel *Q & A*.

7 One otherwise positive review laments that Ramazani "makes little mention of new voices, like of Daljit Nagra" (Jenkins E218)—hence this article. Credit is due to Rennhak who has previously applied Ramazani's terminology to Nagra's *Dover* collection.

8 Of course, English was, long before the British Empire, already a wild mixture of codes, a Germanic language with French, Latin, and Danish influences among many others—a "magnificent bastard tongue," to borrow McWorther's book title.

9 Although a poem, Nagra's *Ramayana* will be cited by page number instead of chapter.line, as his highly unusual numbering system ("Chapter Minus One. five" etc.) creates more confusion than clarity.

10 See also these words from his more recent "Prayer for Gurdwara": "I am Sikh by birth, secular by nature" (*British Museum* 5).

11 For a long time, the general reading public's poetophobia extended to postcolonial studies. As Ramazani observes, both poetry studies and postcolonial studies have been "surprisingly unreceptive to postcolonial poetry" ("Contemporary Postcolonial Poetry" 597).

12 See also Trivedi's longer essay on the topic: "Salman the Funtoosh."

13 See "'Errata': or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*" (*Imaginary Homelands* 22–25).

14 For example: "Fair hipped beauty, you know my nature—/ my heart is a *cakor* bird to the moon of your face" (Dasarath to Kaikeyi, *Ayodhyākāṇḍ* 25.2); "Seeing, each moment, the moon of her husband's face, / she was as joyful as a young partridge hen" (Sita and Ram, *Ayodhyākāṇḍ* 139.1). Also, a nineteenth-century edition of the story of Raja Nal contains this footnote: "It is commonly said that the *chakor* or Indian red-legged partridge is violently in love with the moon" (Temple 257n).

15 Consider also the dated spelling of *Hindoo*, which similarly renders what is a short "u" sound in Hindi with the digraph "oo."

16 In Pattanaik's version, Gautama appears to want to have it both ways, combining the punishments from both Vālmīki and Kampaṉ, though the attempted euphemism is questionable: "He cursed Indra that he would lose his manhood and that his body would be covered with sores" (42).

17 The hornswoggle in the following line is a nominalization of an American slang verb meaning "[t]o get the better of; to cheat or swindle; to hoodwink, humbug, bamboozle" ("hornswoggle, v."). Then again, "Hornswoggle" is also the ring name of the achondroplastic American professional wrestler Dylan Mark Postl, who appears as the Irish mythological trickster figure of the leprechaun.

18 See also pp. 248 and 368 of *Midnight's Children*.

19 Another way of maintaining this connection involves joining the Indian audience of TV adaptations of Hindu epics, not least Sagar's hugely influential version of the *Ramayana* (itself heavily influenced by the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books, as Lutgendorf demonstrates), which Nagra remembers watching at home: "[M]y parents would get out the joss sticks" (qtd. in Armitstead).

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