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Recovering May Price: A Longitudinal Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract: Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is a prominent example of South Asian postcolonial writing in English and features in curricula and criticism as a nuanced instance of the intricacies and traumas of borders and histories in the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, both the novel and its critical analysis display a discernible lack of focus on the issue of sexual violation. In this essay, I undertake a close reading and feminist analysis of one character, May Price. I examine how Ghosh represents her in the novel and argue that critics have read her reductively, if at all. When she is discussed, critics either ignore her identity as a foreign woman who is sexually violated by the Indian protagonists (Tridib and the narrator) or problematically couch the incidents of sexual violation in the vocabulary of romantic love and consent. The narrative, focalized through its patriarchal narrator, whose perspective is obviously created through authorial choices, allows the character no agency to protest these violations and no space for redressal or any sustained reactive expression of opposition. Rather, May's hasty resolutions, absolute forgiveness, and belated consent seemingly turn these violations into seductions, exonerating the assaulters entirely. I highlight that *The Shadow Lines* and attendant critical reflections often choose to examine questions of nation, identity, and memory, which are unquestionably significant, at the expense of the representation and agency of women. In order to address this gap, gendered power dynamics need to be made central and not peripheral to postcolonial scholarship and discussion.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, May Price, postcolonial literature, sexual violation

I. Introduction

A literary text is, by default, located in a network of discourses larger than itself. In its creation, reception, and interpretation, as well as through the conjoined constructs of the author, critic, and reader, the literary text becomes a discursive space that is intersected by several (literary and non-literary) political, economic, and cultural influences. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan argues that literary texts (and attendant semiotic creations like character, plot, narrator, and linguistic representation) should be read within the framework of "sexual politics" (61). One of the methods of feminist criticism is to reread and re-interpret (canonical) literary texts and criticism to highlight how the gendered subject is constituted via textual narratives and characterization and to examine the relations between these characters and socio-political conditions at large.

In this essay, I examine the figure of May Price in one of the most enduring novels in South Asian Anglophone fiction: *The Shadow Lines* (hereafter referred to as *SL*) (1988) by Amitav Ghosh. Through a close analysis of the text and select critical material about it, I argue that May Price is a more complex character than usually understood and show how her being sexually violated is left unproblematized by both the text, which is focalized through the male narrator, and by critics. My reading and analysis aim to explore the character to a fuller extent and highlight this gap in criticism. It is germane to point out that critical attention, for the most part, has been focused on the novel's importance in postcolonial Anglophone fiction from India and its nuanced engagement with the complexities of borders, identity, nationalism, history, cosmopolitanism, decolonization, and communal violence that simultaneously bind and divide the South Asian subcontinent; the intertextual term "shadow lines" has come to subsume a body of connotative meanings within itself.[1]

In an interview with Chitra Sankaran, Ghosh uses the term "peculiar disconnect" to describe the aftereffects of "colonial conditioning," owing to which there is an "absolute lack of any kind of awareness or . . . consciousness of how to make your place in the world[,] . . . [the] inability[,] almost, to cope with our circumstances, our past" ("Diasporic Predicaments" 2). His authorial task, one may surmise, is to poke at

this inability by bringing the lasting traumas of colonialism to the fore and examining cultures' and individuals' coping mechanisms—or lack thereof. Alongside this, he also points out the "historical burden" of English that forces a different kind of amnesia on its (once colonized) users, such as by whitewashing brutal histories and using euphemisms like "pacification" instead of occupation when referring to Burma (now Myanmar) (4). It is evident that for Ghosh, issues of history, violence, and language are closely connected.

Unlike Salman Rushdie's or Vikram Seth's most celebrated postcolonial novels that hinge on macro-violence(s) like the Partition of 1947, Ghosh picks a relatively minor event to illuminate the same concerns in *SL*. The event, though minor in the larger schema of the political history of the subcontinent, nonetheless causes severe trauma to more than one generation of a family, which is representative of many such communities who suffer a double violence: that of communal riots and that of individuals or the state imposing a distorting silence on the event and its aftermath. In *SL*, this instance of twin communal riots in Calcutta and Dhaka in the wake of the theft at the Hazratbal Shrine in Kashmir stands in for many other "minor" violent ruptures that unite the subcontinent in the force of their communal divisions.

However, while the novel nobly tackles the tricky issues of communal violence, death, and the messiness of memory, I suggest that its treatment of gendered violence is less nuanced. The communal riots are symptomatic of a long-enduring malaise of the subcontinent; similarly, the actions, words, and emotional landscapes of the female characters in the novel can be imagined as symptomatic of the malaise of the male narrative. It has often been suggested that the masculine postcolonial text tends to, on the whole, subjugate the issue of gender discrimination and sexual violence in order to address nation, borders, and macrohistory. For instance, Vilashini Cooppan comments that for Franz Fanon,[2] "gender seems to represent a particularity that should be translated, with all possible speed, into the universality and strategic unity of revolutionary culture and the new nation" (Cooppan qtd. in Loomba 163). Similarly, Jenni Ramone summarizes feminist critiques of Fanon (105) and Chinua Achebe (165), both widely regarded decolonial writers

whose trenchant exposition of identity, power, and colonialism is often at the expense of the complexity of their female characters. Sunder Rajan similarly points out the inherent patriarchal biases in the writings of O. V. Vijayan and Rushdie, exemplified in their use of the hybrid Kali-Indira Gandhi/widow figure as the unnatural castrating force (106–09).

Within this framework, I propose to closely examine the portrayal of May Price, a white British woman in *SL*, whose traumas are not only left untreated but also quickly fade away for the sake of the male narrator and protagonist, who almost always provides the only focalizing lens available to the reader. Critics have already commented extensively on the politico-historical and narratorial import of the novel, and those who invoke gender and gender inequality focus primarily on Tha'mma (the narrator's grandmother) and Ila (the narrator's cousin) as representatives of two generations of Indian women whose views on political and personal freedom, individualism, and sexuality are juxtaposed against each other yet are paradoxically equally problematic. Other than that, critical commentary has focused on the two primary male characters—Tridib and his nephew, the unnamed narrator (who has long been read as the intellectual inheritor and extension of Tridib)—and issues of memory, national and notional boundaries, and violence. I study May Price along two lines: as she appears in the text and as she has been treated in a sizeable sample of literary criticism. A critical reading of the latter shows that postcolonial critics, as much as postcolonial male writers, are more likely to focus on colonial/decolonial aspects of the novel than on gender and sexuality.

II. May Price: The Foreigner, the Chronicler, and the Other

May Price as a character is important for two reasons. The first is that in almost all the scholarship on the novel, her presence and role have been largely overlooked or under-interpreted. When her character is discussed, it is as the causative agent of Tridib's death and/or as an eyewitness to his death. It is her account, focalized through the narrator, that finally reveals the bare-bones truth of the tragedy to him and to the reader. This kind of interpretation is limited and glosses over much of

the significance of her character. The second reason I propose to read her carefully is because she is a female character traumatized by sexual violation—not once, but twice. Tridib's explicit, pornographic letter comes without warning or adequate seduction to nineteen-year-old May, and the narrator sexually assaults her many years later in her apartment on the night after Ila's wedding. I do not take issue with the inclusion of sexual assault, which is a ubiquitous reality; the problem is that the narrative allows May no agency or even space for redressal in the aftermath of these assaults. Unlike the narrative's complication of communal traumas and memory, May's reaction to these traumatic episodes of sexual assault displays an obscene meekness: after the first, she travels to India to meet Tridib and tries to engage him in a sexual relationship, and after the second, she makes breakfast for the narrator. In the second instance, the narrative also forces a far more problematic response on the reader that completely robs May of any agency, as I will discuss below. In other words, May's character is much more complicated than current criticism on the novel articulates. Within the power dynamics of postcolonial worlds, she is empowered by her nationality and race yet disempowered by her gender. Reading gender relations as they emerge in the text, therefore, is an attempt to bring to surface a different set of tensions.

A larger question of gender relations is relevant not only within narrative worlds but also between authors and their narrative worlds: can a difference of concerns vis-à-vis women characters be traced between male and female novelists in Anglophone Indian postcolonial writing? Padmini Mongia and Jon Mee agree that there seems to be some dissonance between male and female Indian postcolonial writers, the latter being less self-consciously experimental (in terms of choice of genre and macro-historical events), and therefore less likely to be put on the same pedestal as male writers in the sphere of global academia and readership. Mee suggests that Indian English male writers of the 1980s and 90s, on the whole, "seem to have been drawn to reimagining the nation on an epic scale. . . . Perhaps their assertion of a right to rewrite national history is itself the expression of a certain privilege to which Indian women do not easily gain access" (372). Mongia's question on gender

in postcolonial fiction follows naturally: "[H]as the too-quick embracing of the postcolonial marginalized an already marginalized group [i.e., women]?" (228).

A similar discomfort is evident in Ania Spyra's comparative analysis of Qurratulain Hyder's *Sita Betrayed* and *SL*. Spyra examines *SL* from within a cosmopolitan framework. The Enlightenment definition of cosmopolitanism as the "generic and genderless citizen" (Spyra 1), completely at home in the whole world, is juxtaposed to Ila's inability (and, by extension, the inability of all the women in the novel) to transform into a cosmopolitan being, since women's bodies are heavily invested with "symbolic meaning" that is difficult to erase (2). Spyra calls Ghosh's narrator an "unsympathetic male" who "encourages the reader to side with the nameless male cosmopolitan narrator rather than with the narrator's cousin and (distorted) mirror image," Ila (3). Ila has traveled the world but is looked down on by the narrator, who believes that she has never traveled anywhere while he, who had never traveled until adulthood, is naturally cosmopolitan thanks to his imagination. In other words, the narrator believes that travel is passive but "imagination with precision" is active (Ghosh, *SL* 26). Spyra turns her attention to Ila as an embodied female character who occupies but is not at home in spaces of displacement, striving to escape the mores of Indian bourgeois society only to find a replicate patriarchy at play in England. Within the narrative, Ila (like May, I argue) has no sexual freedom: she confesses to the narrator that she was always chaste and only claimed to be promiscuous to appear exotic because that is what was expected of her as a foreigner (Ghosh, *SL* 207). Sexual freedom, (at places confused with promiscuity by the narrator), therefore, is tied to exoticness, almost as if to say Indian women are not, and cannot, be sexually free but can aspire to be like women in the West. This stereotypes both Indian and Western women and reveals the narrator's fantasy based on the stereotype of the sexually promiscuous foreign woman.

On the surface, Ila and May could be imagined as opposites, just as Tha'mma and Ila are opposites in relation to nation, home, and belonging. Ila is selfish, and May is selfless; Ila forgets, and May remembers; IIa's protests against (Western) neo-imperial powers are trivial pastimes,

but May's work for Amnesty International and other such organizations is a truly ethical commitment; Ila is apparently distanced from Tridib's death while May is at the heart of the episode. Ila is often read as the narrator's alter ego, an embodiment of his aspiration to travel (to some degree channeled into a desire for her rather than for her life). He compensates for his lack of travel with the lessons he learns from Tridib: to "recognize the contemporaneity of the past, to be able to see historical memory as vital to any understanding of the present, and to be able to see different times and places as inextricably intertwined with one's own" (Kaul 134). Ila and the narrator are united in this ability to "travel"; May, in contrast, appears to have no desire to travel, whether in her imagination or in the world. The one time she does travel (to Dhaka from London) ends disastrously with Tridib's death, and the ensuing trauma of the event grounds her to the shrunken space of her spartan lifestyle, as per the first-person narrator's focalization of her character. On the other hand, IIa and May are similar in their constitution through the male gaze. Ila is the object of desire for the narrator because she is exotic by virtue of her upbringing in the West but ungraspable. May, also exotic by virtue of her race, is a channel for Tridib and the young narrator's unfulfilled desire to be cosmopolitan. Tridib and the narrator consistently fetishize the foreign woman and hence Ila (who is culturally exotic) and May (who is racially exotic) become objects of male sexual desire.

The same fetishization is the basis for Nick's extramarital sexual relationships with "exotic" women: "it's his way of travelling," Ila reports to the narrator (Ghosh, *SL* 208). Spyra comments that in *SL*, "[their] mobility on the global scale and their association with the West endow the women primarily with an exotic sexual allure" (16). Tridib's relationship with May is based on the difference between the native and the exotic, and the "mystery of difference" drives his sexual attraction to her (16). Similarly, Nick regards the adult Ila as an exotic object, a new and different manifestation of the racist feelings he had as a boy when he refused to defend her against bullies in school. Suvir Kaul points out that "the discourse of male sexuality is derived from its conflicted or romanticized sense of the 'foreign' female body: for Tridib, May is

foreign and desirable, a figure of romance from far across the seas, as Ila is (somewhat differently) for the narrator" (128).[3] While Spyra's analysis does not include May or the episodes of sexual assault, what she calls the "emptiness" of Ila's life, her "inescapable dependence on men," and the hold of the male gaze that shapes her perception of herself (3) are also and especially true for May.

Like Spyra, several prominent critics who read the novel treat May as a peripheral character. She is primarily seen as the cause of Tridib's tragic death in Dhaka. However, I suggest that May emerges as a complex character and fulfills three crucial roles in the narrative: as a colonizer's descendent who epitomizes colonial guilt, as the more realist editor of the narrator's impressions of people and events (including the event of Tridib's death), and as the recipient of Tridib's and the narrator's sexual advances and assault. I also contend that Ghosh and several critics treat her foreignness as the cause of Tridib's death, because foreignness equals a naïve reliance on the good/bad binary, ignorance of local conditions, and an inability to understand the complexities of oppression and power.[4]

May's foreignness is as much a marker of her identity as her gender. When Tridib points out that Tha'mma (a citizen of India after the Partition) is more of a foreigner than May in Dhaka because the latter does not require a visa to visit Bangladesh, Tha'mma agrees: "Yes, I really am a foreigner here—as foreign as May in India or Tagore in Argentina" (Ghosh, *SL* 215). May's foreignness is also a crucial angle from which the novel explores colonial guilt. May is empathetic, charitable, and clearly sensitive to the excesses of colonialism. Her horror at the gigantic table and upon seeing the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta, for instance, are reactions to capitalist excess and colonialism (53, 188). The novel highlights her empathy and kindness by having her take an immediate liking to Khalil, the simpleton rickshaw puller and Jethamoshai's caregiver in Dhaka (233). As a foreigner, she is depicted as less clued into the familial drama with communal undertones that plays out in Jethamoshai's house,[5] unlike everyone else present there.

In a narrative complicated by crisscrossing temporal and spatial planes via the narrator's memory and imagination, May is the voice of "fact"

rather than imagination, and on several occasions, she corrects the narrator's impressions. In this sense, she is the opposite of Tridib, who has taught the narrator to rely entirely on his imagination (32). It could also be argued that she goes against the grain of the narrative's leaning towards imagination. Kaul suggests that the form of the novel and its primary subject complement each other: the form relies on the question "Do you remember?" and the novel is about the "archaeology of silences[,] . . . a repeated return to those absences and fissures that mark the sites of personal and national trauma" (126).

In many ways, May is the one who remembers. She readjusts the narrator's exaggerated impression of Nick Price, faithful as it was to Ila's fantasy version of Nick that she relayed to the narrator. May's corrections span minor physical details (Nick has straw-coloured rather than yellow hair [Ghosh, *SL* 58]), his ambition (he wanted to become a chartered accountant rather than travel the world [58]), and, of course, a witness' account of the racist attack on Ila when they were school children: "I happened to be at home that day, she said. And I know that Nick didn't stop to help Ila. He ran all the way back. He used to run back home from school early those days" (83). It is possible that, given the tenuous nature of memory in much writing in the postmodernist era, May's bare-bones realist memory may appear uninteresting or old-fashioned to the reader and critic. Yet she produces an important counterbalance in the narrative. In many ways, then, in terms of conflicting forces in the narrative, she *remembers*, while Tridib and the narrator are more prone to imagine.

Her key role as the one who remembers is, of course, related to the lynchpin of the narrative: Tridib's death at the hands of a mob during communal tensions in Dhaka that she and some of his family members mutely witness. Tha'mma's silence is one version of this event. The narrator's father tells another version ("Tridib died in an accident in Dhaka" [*SL* 263]) to avoid traumatizing the young narrator. Robi's recurring nightmare expresses yet another version, in which May is the reason Tridib steps out of the car: "May is screaming at us; I can't hear a word, but I know what she's saying. She's saying: Those two are going to be killed because of you—you're cowards, murderers, to abandon them

here like this" (271). Notwithstanding May's own lifelong trauma of having seen Tridib be killed and perhaps feeling unsure about her role in it for many years, she is the only one who breaks the event down for the narrator, thereby resolving the mystery of Tridib's death for him. She anticipates that the narrator would want to know the "truth" of the tragedy and relates what she remembers (275). From her version, it is likely that the mob may have left the car and its occupants (May, Tridib, his parents and brother, and the narrator's grandmother) alone but would certainly have attacked Khalil and Jethamoshai who were trailing behind the car in Khalil's rickshaw. It is Tha'mma who contradicts herself, torn between the desire to rescue her uncle, Jethamoshai, from Muslim occupants of their ancestral house and fear that would have her abandon him to the mob. May recalls what occurred in those few minutes after the family had left the old house and the mob saw them:

> Your grandmother wanted the driver of our car to drive away. She shouted at him to get away, fast. I shouted back at her and got out of the car. Your grandmother screamed at me. She said I didn't know what I was doing, and I'd get everyone killed. I didn't listen; I was a heroine. I wasn't going to listen to a stupid, cowardly old woman. But she knew what was going to happen. Everyone there did, except me. I was the only one who didn't. I began to run towards the rickshaw. I heard Tridib shouting my name. But I kept running. I heard him running after me. He caught up with me and pushed me, from behind. I stumbled and fell. I thought he'd stop to take me back to the car. But he ran on towards the rickshaw. The mob had surrounded the rickshaw. They had pulled the old man off it. I could hear him screaming. Tridib ran into the mob, and fell upon their backs. He was trying to push his way through to the old man, I think. Then the mob dragged him in. He vanished. I could only see their backs. It took less than a moment. Then the men began to scatter. I picked myself up and began to run towards them. The men had melted away, into the gullies. When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalil's stomach

> open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat, from ear to ear.
>
> That was that; that's all there is to tell. (276)

May is able to recall the scene of horror as both a spectator and a participant. She sees herself partly as the agent of Tridib's death, but this is not without background. Her earlier exhortation to Tridib in Calcutta to act rather than watch helplessly when they come upon an injured dog (189–91)—probably a reaction to the failed attempt at lovemaking at his house, when, as she recalls, he was "painfully shy" (193)—would have compelled him to compensate via a heroic masculine act. Indeed, this kind of action is akin to the chivalric behaviour derived from the fantasy tale of Tristan and Isolde (205–06) that Tridib refashions to imagine a romance between May and himself. This exhortation could also be read as May's residual anger towards Tridib for initiating an unsolicited and non-consensual sexual relationship, which then amounts to very little when she visits him. As I will argue below, the narrative gives her no agency to sustain her outrage over the explicit contents of the letter he wrote to her, and belatedly and quickly recovering, she travels to India to meet him. When he is unable to rise to the task, her frustration spills out thus: "All you're good for is words. Can't you ever *do* anything?" (191; emphasis in original).

The third aspect is May's subjecthood as a woman. Her projection as an object of the sexualized male gaze occurs early in the novel. When Tridib tells his *adda* acquaintances (a group of people that regularly meet at a particular place to shoot the breeze) that he had been to London to meet the Prices, someone asks about May: "And what's she like? . . . Sexy?" (12). Rather than counter or ignore the sexual charge in the question, Tridib answers based solely on the photograph he has of her: "she wasn't sexy, not in the ordinary way. . . . She wasn't beautiful or even pretty in the usual sense, for she had a strong face and a square jaw, but she had thick straight hair which came down to her shoulders . . . and she had a wonderful, warm smile which lit up her blue eyes and gave her a quality all her own, set her apart" (12–13). May is, from her first appearance in the novel, simultaneously exoticized and objectified based

on her race and ostensible appearance (I say ostensible because Tridib is a deliberately unreliable character by the parameters of realism; the *adda* audience does not believe him either). The exoticization continues with the narrator's first glimpse of her at the railway station in Calcutta: "I did not mind that she didn't look at all like a buttercup—to me she was *exotic* enough" (181; emphasis added). This is, of course, also a nod to the legacy of colonial education, thanks to which buttercups, like Wordsworth's daffodils, are simultaneously familiar (through education) and foreign (in experience).

The narrator's own first-hand memory of May is two-fold: when she was visiting Calcutta, and then seventeen years later in London. He recalls meeting her in London at her concert and first describes her according to her physical attributes (16–17). He describes May's hair, shoulders, and stance, as well as her ennui while playing the violin. His recollection of her time in Calcutta is mostly about how she would blush at his attention. Crucially, his fascination with her is based on racial difference, which is symptomatic of a greater fascination with foreignness: he prefers IIa when she is dressed in Western (i.e., exotic) clothes than when she turns up wearing a saree (20). These instances set up the narrator's sexual assault of May as a compliment: in stark contrast to Ila's invariable femininity and physical delicateness, May's mildly masculine appearance stereotypes her as a less attractive woman who should be flattered by male sexual advances.

III. May Price in Critical Analyses

Several critics analyse *SL* in terms of nation, memory, and communal violence while also being cognizant of gender inequality. However, for the most part their discussions focus on Ila and Tha'mma—barely ever on May, and almost never on the episodes of sexual assault. Kaul, for instance, voices his discomfort with gender roles in *SL* towards the end in his oft-cited essay. He states that the narrative, "not unlike the process of sub-continental independence, engenders and empowers political subjects unequally, and indeed represents them asymmetrically" (143). I interpret his use of the term "engenders" in two ways: to give rise to and to give gender to. In keeping with the subcontinent's culture of patriarchy,

"the weight of sexual and cultural definition is borne unequally by men and women, with men as the putative agents of socio-cultural transition and women as its more or less traumatized subjects" (143). Kaul's focus, though, is on personal and public memory and the making of a nation—and thus on the "archivist"-narrator who uses the stories gathered from his family that are full of sorrow and trauma to "search for meaning, for explanations and reasons, for the elusive formal and causal logic that will allow the narrator's autobiography (and equally, the national biography that is interwoven with it in the novel) to cohere, to make sense" (125).

When Kaul refers to the narrator's sexual assault of May, he cites the end of the novel, which, "with the narrator and May lying peacefully in each other's arms—*this time, she has asked him to stay*—offers a catharsis of the narrator's violent, drunker, earlier attempt to force himself upon her. For this, as for her account of Tridib's love for her and of his death, he is grateful" (133; emphasis added). Kaul therefore acknowledges that an assault took place but is far from holding the narrator responsible. Rather, Kaul states that with this final act of conciliation, not only has the narrator acquired an understanding of the sexual relationship between Tridib and May, but more importantly, May has now equipped him with "an emotional vocabulary" to think of Tridib's death as a sacrifice (133). I argue that May's final act of completely forgetting her trauma and forgiving the narrator is to his benefit, not hers.

Kaul finds that the women in the novel, especially Ila, carry the heaviest burdens of history, but he also argues that their "missteps" lead to great conflicts (143). It is quite obvious that the narrative attributes these "missteps" to women while men wield all control (of narratorial imagination). The men in the novel have the potential to offer "a radical critique of political boundaries, vaporizing their rigidities into shadow-lines," but for the women "there are no transformations of cultural frontiers, only inelegant transgressions" (Kaul 143). Ila is a "narrative scapegoat" whose life is a cautionary tale of miscegenation (130). It is telling that the authorial voice uses Ila to exemplify gendered cultural dislocations, and the narrator, who has always fantasized about Ila as a sexually promiscuous woman, laughs at her unfortunate marriage to Nick with a

"vindictive undertone" (131). Nevertheless, Kaul ends his essay by praising the novel for being a "dialogic, more open-ended enactment of the difficult interdependencies and inequalities that compose any national biography" (143). Kaul's final analysis recognizes the gender biases in the novel but does not examine the episodes of sexual violation.

Similarly, Padmini Mongia states that she assigned *SL* in her course in an American university to provide an example of a postcolonial Indian novel in English while also wanting to "problematize the transgressive potential of the postcolonial when it needs to accommodate the construction of gender" (225). Writing in 1993, Mongia argues that in North American academia's bid to create the "counter-canon" of so-called "Third World" literature, fiction tackling questions of nationhood and colonialism often takes precedence over fiction that focuses on the issue of gender.

The key themes from the novel that Mongia included in her teaching were the act of writing back to the Empire, the nature of borders, memory, and narrative, and the "imaginative rewriting of history, culture, biography, and experience" (Mongia 227). However, when Mongia discusses "sexual freedom" (227), she does so only in the context of Ila's character. The sexual assaults on May are not mentioned, at least in her article (though they may have come up in class discussions).

Drawing a contrast between Ila and the narrator, Mongia points out how the woman is already doomed to lose: "for the narrator cultural differences can be collectively contained to create not a fragmented self but a self that belongs to many places," but for Ila, "cultural differences create only a small, quivering self, one incapable of action, and more importantly, even of self-respect" (227). Ila, therefore, aspires to cosmopolitanism but cannot wrest her freedom or selfhood in either culture. Mongia avers that it is not enough to read "Ila as an example of how cultural stresses operate on women, but rather to suggest that the particular nuances created by gender lead in Ghosh's text to *impotence* for the women *he* represents" (227; emphasis added).

This "impotence," a crippling, paralyzing feature of women as gendered and sexual beings, is even more starkly reflected in my reading of May. Even Tha'mma, whose viewpoints on belonging and sexual

freedom come across as dated, has more agency than May, who is afflicted by the lifelong trauma of Tridib's death. She is made to appear stagnant, leading a monkish life; she has neither a conventionally successful career—she plays the oboe with "a bored, mechanical precision" (*SL* 16) in an orchestra only to make a living (17) and volunteers for Oxfam, Amnesty, and other relief agencies as a way to deal with her trauma—nor close ties to family (especially her brother) or friends (her social life is never mentioned). Mongia's reading concludes that while Ila is "constrained through her gender and therefore representative of a certain historical truth," she is also "the embodiment of certain fictive and narrative choices that make her merely a sacrifice on the altar of the liberating energy of the postcolonial that the narrator has access to" (228). This is an important argument that highlights authorial responsibility, which forms the basis for my reading as well. The representation of female characters through the male gaze, without examination or potential for posing challenges to the status quo, has a long history in postcolonial narratives and is amplified in the case of May. May, the British woman in the postcolonial novel, has even less sexual freedom or imagination than Ila, a postcolonial Indian woman in Britain.

Rituparna Roy's analysis of the novel is particularly egregious in its lack of reflection on the nexus of gender and postcolonialism. Like other critics, Roy elicits intertextual references (Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, the 1984 riots, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*), discusses primary themes (loss and maturity, the Partition and its aftermath, geo-politics), and treats the novel as an exercise in historiography rather than history (Roy 111–13). She quotes from an interview with Ghosh in which he ruminates on borders—their "arbitrariness, their constructedness" and how they are "naturalized" (qtd. in Roy 113). She points out that for Ghosh, Tridib, and the narrator, "shadow lines that connected people were infinitely more significant than the ones that divided them" (Roy 114). Such a parallel stretches the legacy of Tridib to the narrator: the generational gap between them is also a shadow line. Moreover, she points out that vision, imagination, and death pull the two characters together. She quotes and endorses Sunder Rajan's claim that the narrator's entire life "is played out at the level of loving imitation, even

surrogacy: he sees through Tridib's eyes, studies history like Tridib does, thinks Tridib's thoughts, and finally *loves* Tridib's lover" (Sunder Rajan qtd. in Roy 116; emphasis added).

Roy describes May as "the English girl Tridib had fallen in love with" who spends the rest of the novel acknowledging "her own guilt that leads her on to intensive soul-searching" (116). Roy further argues that Tridib fell in front of the mob as a direct result of May's goading him to do so (117). Although May wonders whether Tridib would have done so even without her pushing him because she had no control over him and he knew well enough it was "a sacrifice" (Ghosh, *SL* 277), according to Roy, "Ghosh makes it clear that Tridib's death was no 'mystery'. It is merely May's belated excuse to exorcize herself of the guilt that had plagued her for seventeen long years" (117). Roy's supporting argument for this reading is that "there can be little doubt that Westerners cannot fully comprehend the complexities of Asian political realities, brought up as they are on Western notions of liberal democracy" (118). While Roy's claim may partially explain May's motives, it may also be the case that Tridib desired to project stereotypical features of masculinity: strength (physical and mental), taking charge of the situation, and even sacrificing for love, as the knight Tristan does. In this reading, Tridib's expression of his gendered identity acquires a greater significance to himself than to anyone else and may be read as the cause of his death.

Although Roy delves into the historical factors behind the riots in Dhaka (and Calcutta and Khulna), which are tied to cross-border communal tensions that have a long and painful history, it does not stop her from pinning the blame on May for Tridib's death. She quotes John C. Hawley, who compares Piya from Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* to May, to argue that both characters are equally "oblivious to the danger" they are putting everyone else in "by romantically standing before a 'force of nature'" (Hawley qtd. in Roy 118).

Roy arrives at this interpretation also through Anshuman Mondal's take on May. Mondal suggests that May is the symbol of the "disjunction" between "Western humanitarianism and the dynamics of communalism peculiar to the subcontinent" (174) and points out how May's "humane" interventions are laid out to make her credentials evident to

the reader. He interprets the unmistakable "condescension" in her tone towards Tridib in both the dying dog and riot scenes: she comes across as "articulating herself with the self-righteousness of someone who is secure in the knowledge that her values trump all others" (175). He also suggests that in *SL* and *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh does not "judge or apportion blame but he does demonstrate how a 'Western' urge to political intervention forecloses an ethical understanding of the 'local' standards of conduct" (174). Kaul similarly argues that May is a "figure for the deluded idealism, the cultural dislocation or incomprehension" that ultimately leads to tragedy (132). Although he does not explicitly mention it, Mondal seems to hint that in both novels, the agents of these naïve interventions are women. Like others, he calls May the Englishwoman who Tridib is "romantically involved" with (10). None of these critics foreground the episodes of sexual violation or May's complicated status as a foreign woman, not just a foreigner.

Yet another critic, Crystal Taylor, analyses *SL* within the framework of nationalism and ideology provided by Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, and Ranajit Guha. Taylor emphasizes Anderson's repetition of the word "fraternity" as reflecting a "specifically male society or brotherhood," which in turn suggests that "nations as Anderson defines them exclude women, at least in some measure" (85). In this respect, although Taylor does not quite shift attention to the female characters in the novel, she highlights the gender imbalance at the heart of the notion of nationhood.

Citing Tridib's desire to meet May as "the completest of strangers" in the explicit letter to her (Ghosh, *SL* 159), Taylor suggests that for Tridib, "freedom can only be found in escape—escape from familial obligations, from friends' expectations, and most improbable of all, from one's own entrenched habits, attitudes, and behaviors" (Taylor 87). His notion of freedom, however, is "both impractical and untenable on the subcontinent in 1964" (87). Taylor invokes May to explore the intricate use of mirrors as a metaphor and narrative device in the novel: "Just as they [mirrors] thwart the narrator's connection with Nick, so mirrors also encourage a *false unity* between the narrator and May as they sit in a sandwich shop discussing her relationship with Tridib" (88; emphasis

added). When May tells the narrator about Tridib's death, he does not console her but asks more questions to fulfill his curiosity until he notices that she has become "awkward, now, uncomfortable with [him]" (Ghosh, *SL* 193). Their eyes meeting in the mirror in the sandwich shop estranges them, but when their eyes meet directly, they "share a moment of mutual recognition, enabling the narrator to apologize for forcing himself upon her sexually" (Taylor 88). This is the extent to which the sexual assault is explored in Taylor's analysis.

IV. May Price as a Victim of Sexual Violation

These brief summaries of the criticism on *SL* bring forth several issues. First, while most critics recognize gender imbalances in the novel, they do not explore these in the same depth as other aspects of the narrative. Second, when they do focus on female characters, it is primarily on Tha'mma and Ila, who represent two generations of Indian women. Third, the element of sexual violation (including sexual assault) and its victim, May Price, are not given due—if any—attention. It is possible, as Mongia suggests, that in a bid to focus on postcolonialism, diaspora, and the traumas of communal violence, the character of May, representative of a more empowered race but disempowered gender, is rendered invisible.

In May's character, race and gender cannot be divorced, and readings that involve a simultaneously privileged and disempowered character, though difficult, are not anomalous. Sunder Rajan points out that in novels like Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* and E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, the central women characters are (presumably) raped or assaulted as "an 'allegory' of other political encounters" (67): class, in the case of the former, and colonial relations, in the latter. That is, these women are victims both because of their gender and because of their class or race. Tridib's and the narrator's fascination with May, expressed as sexual desire, is fueled as much by May's racial identity as her gender.

It is not only critics of *SL* who diminish the significance of sexual violation; the narrative itself does not allow any space for May to articulate (or feel) anger towards Tridib and the narrator. Instead, the narrative turns the first event in question (Tridib's explicit letter to May)

into a trigger for sexual arousal mixed with shame, and the second (the narrator's assault while drunk after Ila's wedding) ends with maternal forgiveness, clean sheets and breakfast, and worse—May understands the narrator's assault of her as a confirmation of her sexual attractiveness.

Tridib's sexually explicit letter to May is about eight pages long (*SL* 152–59) and describes in great detail two strangers meeting in an abandoned amphitheatre in post-war London, having sex, and being secretly watched by a young boy, ostensibly Tridib. In line with the overall mode of the novel, the "truth" of the story is suspect. More important than the contents of the letter is May's reaction:

> It was hot because she was angry, she decided. And no wonder she was angry—anyone would be if they'd got a pornographic letter from a man they'd never met, would never meet. She was shaking now, with anger: what right had he to write to her like that? Really, what right? It was an intrusion, a violation of her privacy; that was why she was trembling. It was like seeing a flasher. It was incredible, mad; only a madman would think of writing a letter like that. (159)

However, her feelings of outrage at the letter are immediately diffused when she lies to her mother and says Tridib has invited her to Calcutta (160). Never again is this anger revisited—in conversations with Tridib or the narrator or even in her own thoughts.[6] In fact, she makes good on her lie and visits Tridib in Calcutta.

Kaul reads the epistolary correspondence between May and Tridib as "[t]he seductions of 'foreignness' for the male imagination" (132). He calls the "sexual invitation" "romantic, rather florid" prose but does not read it as a violation of May as a person, and nor do the other critics cited above. Interestingly, lying to her mother and covering up contents of the letter, quite contrary to her characteristic truthfulness, invites an interpretation of May as belatedly consenting to the expression of sexual interest by Tridib. This is problematic, for "[n]ot only does consent transform rape into seduction at the last moment, the desire of the seduced is imagined in, not despite, the act of resistance" (Leach 87). Tridib and the narrator are influenced not only by Tristan and Isolde

but also Hindi films, hinted at through a Hindi film song the narrator hums one evening on his way to meet Ila. A trope played out ad nauseum in popular Hindi cinema is of the heroine resisting the hero's advances while secretly or unknowingly desiring him. In this sense, the male characters in the novel display symptoms of the same "culturally conditioned misogyny" (Sunder Rajan 109) apparent in cultural artefacts like films and in the norms of Indian middle-class patriarchy.

Soon after the scene with the letter, the narrator describes his sexual assault of May in detail. The two incidents are interjected by the narrator's recollection of the events leading to the Dhaka visit. It is important to notice the juxtaposition of these two events of sexual violation in the narrative: the temporal gap between them is squeezed in the narrator's retelling, harkening to the idea that the narrator faithfully lives out Tridib's life. If that is indeed the case, could the idea that the narrator acknowledges, however half-heartedly, his own act as sexual assault allow the reader to retrospectively view the letter episode also as violation and not seduction?

The sexual assault takes place the evening of Nick and Ila's wedding. The description goes on for about six pages. In this span, May once tries to stop the narrator by saying that he thinks he is attracted to her only because he is drunk and that she is old enough to be his spinster aunt (Ghosh, *SL* 175), but she never once blames him. The morning after the assault, she lets him off the hook with an apology she has to extract out of him:

> I'm afraid you'll have to think of some way of saying it, she said. That's absolutely the very least I expect.
>
> I'm sorry, I said. What else can I say? Is there anything I can do to show you how sorry I am?
>
> She was still looking at me steadily, but now there was a twitch at the corner of her mouth.
>
> Not feeling quite such a he-man now, may we surmise? she said. (177)

With this line, and a smiling acceptance of his apology, she proceeds to make him breakfast.

However, the incident does not end there. The narrative's treatment of the sexual assault is most egregious in an episode at the end of the day, when the narrator apologizes once again after their awkward conversation in the sandwich shop: "That's all right, she said gruffly. I was a bit scared at the time, but I didn't really mind—not much anyway. I was amazed actually—that anybody should think of *me* like that. . . . Yes, really, she said, smiling" (194; emphasis in original). With this utterance, May turns the sexual assault into an expression of the narrator's sexual desire for her, her quasi-consent to this desire, and, most crucially, her self-affirmation of sexual desirability. Interestingly, in both cases of assault, there is no clear build-up of the male character's desire for May or any genuine seduction. Other than her racial identity and physical proximity (in the latter case), what is the basis for these episodes? Does the narrative provide May with any succour or relief after these assaults? Is her trauma registered as keenly as the generational trauma of Tridib's death? How can the reader justify her responses to these assaults except as misogynistic interpretations of a victim's reactions that leave the assaulter feeling exonerated?

The closing lines of the novel depict the narrator sleeping next to (or with) May at her invitation. Her desire for her assaulter (a parallel to her purported desire for Tridib) and his reading of the situation absolve him of any responsibility for the assault, which is now forgiven and seemingly forgotten: "I stayed, and when we lay in each others' arms quietly, in the night, I could tell that she was glad, and I was glad too, and grateful, for the glimpse she had given me of a final redemptive mystery" (277). Without protest, May appears to accept the narrator as her only sexual salve, and the trauma of sexual assault is forgotten almost as quickly as the event occurred.

Gender and sexual desire are imbalanced in other ways in the novel as well. The narrator does not shy away from mentioning his sexual exploits with prostitutes, but Ila confesses to him that she was sexually chaste until she got married, and May's sexual experiences are not alluded to except in the two episodes of assault. Since "male desire and power controls female subjecthood" (Hesford 200), May speaks but never deviates from a patriarchal version of a woman who should be desirous of sexual

violation. The act of speaking is made rather conspicuous by the narrative. As is evident, the narrator and Tridib believe strongly that we all live in stories (Ghosh, *SL* 201) and that we are almost never free of others' inventions of ourselves and the world (34). All of the narrator's interactions with May are ultimately filtered retrospectively through his focalization. Her sparse flat, ascetic lifestyle, and masculine appearance are all available to the reader only through the narrator's words. Though May speaks, her words and her story are ultimately shaped by the men around her, especially the narrator.

The erasure of direct speech in most instances is further solidified through the textual technique deployed in the novel: conversations in the narrative are marked by a curious and distinct lack of quotation marks. The narratorial style clearly desires to emphasize the nature of narrative itself, of reported speech and memory, and of (multiple) focalizations as the only access to an event—i.e., historiography rather than history. The narrator occupies this narratorial space in almost the entirety of the novel, making it that much more difficult to detect the differences between authorial intervention, the narrative, the first-person narrator-character, and the other characters who are never free of being judged, summarized, and presented in a particular way to the reader. For instance, when May tells the narrator about Tridib's first letter to her, she is reported to have said: "It was nice to feel that *someone* wanted to befriend her. She had written back, and after that they had written to each other regularly—short, chatty letters, usually. Soon, penfriend-like, they had exchanged photographs" (19; emphasis in original). Is "penfriend-like" a quality ascribed to the exchange by the narrator or by May? The reader cannot know for sure because the narrative does not clarify this. The reader's only access to May (and all other characters) is through the narrator, who is prejudiced, patriarchal, and heavily reliant on imaginary reconstructions. With the lack of quotation marks to mark dialogue, speech and event are flattened in terms of agency and (re)presentation.

In this context, the minimal freedom of articulation available to a character is the direct expression of their own words, rather than their utterances or reactions being summarized by the narrator. It is pertinent

that each instance of forgiveness by May is articulated in direct speech. So, when May turns her assault into an affirmation of her desirability as I cite above, the narrator is genuinely let off the hook by the woman he has assaulted because her approval of this act is (relatively) unmediated by his gaze and voice. This stands in contrast to his judgement of Ila as someone who travels the world but is really just stringing together bathrooms in airports (22–23).

The distinction between the lived experiences of the characters and their inner worlds and the first-person narrator's imagination of them is blurry, and the narrator wields great power over the characters. As Spyra comments, the narrator has a "patriarchal bias" (7) and possesses "the authority afforded to the male gaze, which is thus the only point of view from which we can see the female characters. Therefore, what we know about Ila, and other women in the novel, is a fantasy constructed by the narrator himself, especially since he attaches primary value to the imagination throughout the novel" (15). In this sense, while direct speech might empower female characters, in the instances I highlight above, it serves the purpose of exonerating the narrator of any wrongdoing. In contrast to the lingering trauma and aftereffects of Tridib's death, the treatment of the sexual violation of May seems to be based on the male narrator's subconscious belief that he has committed only superficial violence and that perpetrators of sexual assault can expect absolution without repercussions.

V. Conclusion

The aim of my analysis has been to highlight a female character subjected to sexual violation in a male-authored narrative with a male narrator and her treatment in some critical readings of the novel in order to examine how, and with how much nuance, the narrative and critics deal with the aftermath of sexual violation and assault, especially in the context of a postcolonial novel deeply involved with questions of communal violence, nation and partition, and memory and imagination. In the colonial metaphor, the colonizer imagines himself in the masculine role, invading and taking over the feminized land and the women of the colonized community by justifying his use of force as both necessary

and ultimately welcome; rape turns into consensual sex, and consent has always already been imagined into the act of colonial takeover. Justine Leach points out that "European assertions of proprietary rights to the colonial body through the language of gender violence largely rely on the trope's evocation of rape myths that deny the validity of female non-consent" (85). This claim helps to explain the sexual violations of May, though in the case of *SL*, the polarity of race is reversed. In Ghosh's novel, sexual conquest is of the white woman by the brown man, first through assault and then by her apparent consent. In the postcolonial act of writing back to the Empire, one power dynamic is upended while another code of oppression remains intact.

The women in this novel are imagined into being through a patriarchal gaze. The narrative voice flattens their actions, thoughts, and words to rob them of agency, so much so that these women characters have no space for redressal or rebuttal. The most extreme example of this lack of agency is personified in the figure of May Price, the well-meaning but naïve Englishwoman, whose racial identity turns her into an exotic being and, in turn, the figure of apparent sexual desire of the male Indian protagonist(s). This sexual desire cannot be imagined as separate from racial relations and is expressed through violation rather than seduction. May is significant as the site of (corrective) memory and colonial guilt but also as a victim of sexual violation. Since the reader has only filtered access to her life and inner world, what can be taken as evident is at the level of the narrative. The narratorial choice of giving her the space to express her sexual compliance in her own words certainly raises questions about the problematic resolution between the assaulter and the victim that benefits the former and denigrates the latter. As I show above, May cannot express her anger or trauma in either event of sexual violation; rather, the narrative turns her non-consent into an expression of sexual affirmation and an invitation to her assaulters for consensual sexual relationships. Popular culture, legal discourses, and male-authored fiction more often than not imagine the assaulted woman exactly so: as resisting but already seduced and consenting.

Through the present study of one example, I have tried to underscore gender biases and apathy towards sexual violation that persist in

male-authored literary narratives and show how critics of such texts tend to gloss over such biases as well. Since *SL* continues to be an important and celebrated novel in the tradition of postcolonial English writing from India, it is vital to address this gap in criticism and interpretation of this novel. Reading gender politics into literary texts has long had the potential to bring characters like May Price and issues of gender dynamics into the primary discourse on the postcolonial novel rather than relegate them to the sidelines.

Notes

1 For instance, Trivedi invokes "shadow lines" as a phenomenon specific to South Asia, especially India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, in that people of these nations have always assumed that the geopolitical boundaries between these nation-states are porous because of shared histories and cultures, both benign and malicious (188).

2 Fanon's problematic understanding of gender inequity in the context of race is encapsulated in this remark: "Between these white breasts that my wandering hands fondle, white civilization and worthiness become mine" (qtd. in Leach 90). In this and other writing on postcolonial dynamics of power, the white woman becomes a symbol of purity and the desire to possess her becomes, for the Black man, a way to wrest parts of the psyche denied to him by racist colonial hegemony, Leach explains. However, the white woman's consent is primarily absent or her desire is *a priori* assumed in this formulation.

3 In fact, in the novel, barring the previous generations, no sexual or romantic relationship exists between two people who share a national, racial, or cultural identity, and none of the relationships culminates in any lasting happiness or domestic bliss (Ila-narrator, Tridib-May, narrator-May, Nick-Ila). This trope is surprisingly common in South Asian diaspora literature, as seen in Maxey's extensive study of mixed-race relationships, "Brave New Worlds?"

4 My reading is bolstered by including the figure of Piya in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* into analysis, wherein Piya's foreignness is sufficient cause for her to be duped by a local jetty owner; for her to need rescuing from crocodiles, forest officers, angry villagers, and a cyclonic storm; and for her inability to grasp the complexities of villagers wanting to kill a man-eating tiger. Foreignness is also the key to the male protagonist's sexual desire for Piya. Even before speaking to her, Kanai reads Piya's appearance and body language and decides she is a foreigner, articulating markers such as her boyish clothes and short hair and the absence of a *bindi*. Kanai is clearly adept at evaluating women based on their appearances and decides that "despite her silver ear stud and the tint of her skin, she was not Indian, except by descent. . . . [H]e was convinced of it: she was a

foreigner. . . . [T]he neatly composed androgyny of her appearance seemed out of place, almost exotic" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 3). It is interesting that both Piya and May are foreigners, androgynous in appearance, and the objects of sexual desire of male (Indian) protagonists. On a slightly unrelated but intertextual note, there is also an odd connection between the feminine ideals in the two novels, Ila and Kusum, in that they both have a mole on the swell of their breasts (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 91; *SL* 79).

5 Jethamoshai is Tha'mma's paternal uncle, once a voluble lawyer, now bedridden, forgetful, and spiteful, who refused to leave his ancestral house in Dhaka during the Partition when the rest of the family did. When Tha'mma was still a child, the house was divided in half between her father and his older brother (Jethamoshai) due to familial fighting. Once Tha'mma and her sister were married off, and their half of the house empty, Jethamoshai, a staunch Hindu, brought in Muslim refugees to occupy this part so that no one from his brother's family could lay claim to their portion.

6 One could also compare this episode to the treatment of trauma following sexual assault in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The sexual assault of Estha by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man in Abhilash Talkies (103) causes several successive tragedies and shapes Estha's entire adulthood. The notion of having become unclean (105) is urgently tied to the fear that this will happen again and his mother will love him less (106, 113). Afraid that his molester will find him in Ayemenem, Estha sets up an alternate abode, which then results in Sophie's accidental drowning, Velutha's discovery by the police, and Estha's separation from his sister and mother. The narrative repeatedly brings to surface the memory of the event, as well as Estha's physical and emotional reactions to it (like his adulthood habit of bathing and washing clothes obsessively). Such depictions drive home the point that the event may have occurred once, but the aftereffects may last a lifetime.

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