ariel: a review of international english literature
Vol. 56 No. 1 Pages 1–26

"A Different Kind of Reality": Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* as Global Gothic

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Abstract: Engaging with narrative motifs of death, ghostliness, and a variety of underground activities, this article reads contemporary British author Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* (2009) as a literary example of the global Gothic. The purpose of this approach is to arrive at a better comprehension of the social, economic, and geographical contexts from which *In the Kitchen* emerges and which impact, as I argue in the second half of the essay, the main character Gabriel's emotional and ethical responses to the exploitative criminal practices he recognizes underpin Western consumerism. To this end, I first reflect on the rather mixed critical reception of *In the Kitchen* and argue that much of the negative criticism about its excess and incoherence in fact highlights Ali's interest in the elusive, hard-to-follow structures of global commerce. I then situate the novel in relation to the contemporary literary Gothic and related conversations about the global, the postcolonial, and the transnational.

Keywords: Gothic, neoliberalism, global, compassion, hauntology

I. Introduction

Despite the critical acclaim and huge commercial success of *Brick Lane* (2003), the reception of contemporary British author Monica Ali's third novel, *In the Kitchen* (2009), was quite mixed, if not outright negative. In addition to exploiting tempting puns about the novel's central culinary orientation—that the work is "overcooked" (Arana), "overstuffed" (Grimes), or a sort of "cultural stew" (Hodgson)—several reviewers complain, directly or indirectly, about the heterogeneity and

incompatibility of the book's topics, describing it as a "novel of ideas [in which] characters are little more than mouthpieces" (Birch) and suggesting that Ali's "State of England novel" (Brouillette 532) is an "unsuccessful attempt at tackling the state of the nation" (Birch). Invariably, these reviews imply that Ali explores too many ideas, looks at too many states of the country. Indeed, she addresses many issues that do not, on first reading, reproduce the coherence of artistic vision that made *Brick Lane* so appealing. The story of Gabriel Lightfoot, master chef of the Imperial Hotel in London in the early 2000s, begins when he discovers the dead body of a coworker in the basement. This leads to several complications, chief among which is his impulsive decision to give shelter to Lena, a young, unhoused Eastern European kitchen-hand from the same hotel: when she offers sex in exchange for accommodation and Gabriel accepts it, the arrangement destroys both his ambitions to marry his British fiancée and his new career as chef and investor in a posh, soon-to-open restaurant. In addition, the circumstances of the liaison force the confused Gabriel to review his charitable motives and intentions and the reader to reflect on the nature of compassion in metropolitan London. Throughout the novel's nuanced portrayal of Gabriel's ordeal, we read about ageing, memory, migrancy, family relations, the transformation of many industries under Margaret Thatcher, the characteristics of advanced transnational capitalism, and the cultural-legal-economic consequences of the United Kingdom's deeper (and in retrospect, only temporary) integration into the European Union. And, of course, the novel offers many, many culinary details. I contend that if all this is "excessive" and "overspilling"—terms that critical discourse uses to describe Gothic literature (Wolfreys xi)—this thematic exuberance is at once the consequence and the source of the unfathomable Gothic depth that Ali sees in the (post-)global world of work, production, and consumption. Thus, I argue that the novel's death- and love-related storylines (carriers of Gothic imagery) meaningfully supplement the economy- and politics-related plots, which are all reflections on globalization. Additionally, I follow up on some of the ethical implications of what has come to be termed, under Jacques Derrida's influence, "hauntology." I explore Gabriel's attempt to help, in very ambivalent ways, the

ghostly, luckless Lena as well as the ways in which charitable action remains defined, even delimited, by precisely those social phenomena whose adverse effects originally trigger support and care from responsive observers.

To achieve these objectives, I first discuss the concept of the contemporary Gothic and its relationship to transnational capitalism and postcoloniality. Next, I concentrate on *In the Kitchen*'s Gothic storyline and imagery; I argue that, through this engagement with the Gothic, Ali's commentary about the post-millennial British economy becomes a metacommentary about the fright and ontological insecurity the characters experience. Finally, I examine Gabriel's position and ethical-emotional response to the abuse and suffering he recognizes around him.

Authored by a British Asian writer and featuring a migration theme, *In the Kitchen* falls into the category of postcolonial fiction "in a very precise sense": though it refers to the "legacies of various colonial pasts," it is also "closely concerned with the contradictions of the present" (Holden 353). More specifically, its representational strategies, symbolic language, and dark vision of an unfinished, tense historical reckoning with Britain's imperial past instantiate the subgenre of the postcolonial Gothic. In doing so, the novel shows its awareness of the dominant tropes and general aesthetic system of the "imperial Gothic," to borrow Patrick Brantlinger's term, but without adhering to the ideology inherent in most examples of nineteenth- or early twentieth-century Gothic literature. Instead, the postcolonial Gothic signals "re-engagement with the lived realities of the twenty-first-century postcolonial societies" (Illott 22) and, in processing themes of violence, exclusion, or silencing, features "new contexts" (e.g., the refugee crisis) (23), "new racisms" (e.g., Islamophobia) (23, 25), and "new monsters" (e.g., the shapeshifting, vampiric figure of the soucouyant[1]) (30). Crucially, the twenty-first-century postcolonial Gothic is characterized by "a newly materialist focus" (Illott 30) that foregrounds "systematic and economic structures of inequality" (30).

Indeed, the concern of the authors of the postcolonial Gothic with unfair material distribution, forced migration, neocolonial practices, and changes in the legal and technological aspects of work and production

are reminders of how profoundly the transformations of Western economies impacted the rise of the Gothic genre in general: as Rebecca Duncan explains in her paraphrase of Stephen Saphiro's work, the first examples of the literary Gothic can be located "at those moments in the history of the capitalist world-system when one phase of accumulation gives way to another: periods when the shape of reality shifts to disorientating and widely injurious effect" (Duncan 242). Such new paradigms emerged in the eighteenth century, and after a succession of newer phases during the nineteenth and the early- and mid-twentieth centuries, the currently prevailing global economic arrangements also provide enough cultural-psychological confusion to find artistic outlet in contemporary cults of the scary and the unknowable. Following Duncan's and Saphiro's point, scholars locate the contemporary form of the Gothic in shifts from one prevailing economic order to another during late modernity. These include, for example, *Neoliberal Gothic* (2017), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002), and *Twenty-First-Century Gothic* (2019). While I draw a great deal of inspiration from such literary historians, cultural critics, and philosophers as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben, I see the Gothic dimensions of *In the Kitchen* primarily as a set of formal choices and a particular vision necessitated by exposure to the effects of contemporary capitalism and the dislocation generated by a transnational milieu.

With its focus on neoliberal conditions of work, transnational corporate structures, multicultural urban environments, and contact with characters from outside the UK (often without a direct colonial historical link), the novel's engagement with the frightening, the irrational, and the unburied also places the story in the generic context of the global Gothic. Ali engages with the deep contradiction that exists "between a seemingly irresistible modernity, and past legacies that not only refuse to go away but draw renewed vitality from the very globalizing process" (Dirlik 275–76). For example, the unprecedented movement of people across national boundaries that Ali sees at the core of this new world order can be understood as the outcome of economic rationalization and new political freedoms, but it can also, according to a less optimistic narrative, be construed as the result of "new kinds of

disturbances to identities and borders" (Byron 371). In the latter case, the adoption of the Gothic as a "ready-made language" (372) is a reaction to the various repressive, incomprehensible, and terrifying aspects of the global world order. Crucially, as Glennis Byron contends, the highly complex transnational flows to maintain this order no longer translate into a present-day West and its violent, haunting past opposition, or even a neat West and its Orientalist/exotic Other dichotomy (373). Instead—as Ali's sweeping and simultaneous take on Britain, Africa, Ukraine, Belarus, and the European Union persuasively demonstrates—the global Gothic can at once evoke the lingering economic and political dominance of traditional power blocks and the emergence of new geographical-national formations, in-between places generating new meanings and anxieties.

II. Creating the Ghost: Work, Migration and Consumerism in a Global Setting

Despite the absence of critical discussions of the otherworldly in Ali's novel, readers are likely to recognize a distinct Gothic imagery in Gabriel's story. The basement where, in the opening of the first chapter, a night-porter's body is found is referenced as the "catacombs" (Ali, *In the Kitchen* 12), a place where a "fertile imagination would [easily] place skeletons behind [the] . . . doors" (131). The subterranean level is not the only location in the hotel that is linked to death; it extends to others. Plastic flowers in the offices remind Gabriel of "funeral parlours" (10). The old, original kitchen makes him think of its earlier function as "part prison, part lunatic asylum" (28). A late nineteenth-century building, the Imperial Hotel underwent "as many previous incarnations" as the number of "flying buttresses and gargoyles on its Gothic Revival exterior" (34). Several workers seem to inhabit a dimension beyond the ordinary: a hellish fire envelops the grill man (14), the breath of the head pastry chef is always icy (25), and the housekeeping superintendent seems to be a vampire (458). When Lena appears for the first time, it happens in the catacombs where the aforementioned death has just taken place and where "[n]aked light bulbs . . . cast . . . Halloween shadows" (29). As befits such a location, she inhabits a Gothic body: "That

girl, Lena, standing in the doorway in the jumble of shadow and light, let [Gabe] look at her and she looked back at him. Her face was thin and rigid and her hands, which she held twisted together at her chest, were fleshless claws" (33). It is little surprise then that Gabriel—who finds Lena's spectral body and "ghoulish self" (46) so irresistible that he embarks on a self-destructive affair with her—is at one point described as looking like a dark-haired "Italian count" (74).

Why does Ali resort to such language and imagery to tell a story set in the London service-sector in the recent past? True, these images convey the general sensation of loss and fear, but while fright, deprivation, and terror are very possible emotional experiences for many types of characters that Ali's work features—victims of human trafficking, refugees from war-torn regions or repressive political regimes—to argue that the hotel (this "saddest place on earth" [93]) is Gothically charged just because of the traumatic personal memories of the often displaced characters does not account for the presence of a Gothic dimension in the novel's thematic strands that are not (directly) related to migration, wars, or colonial legacies.

There is an episode in the novel that, because of its language and thematic orientation, makes a good starting point for a deeper critical engagement with the function of the Gothic. At a relatively late point in the novel, Gabriel talks with his knowledgeable and influential business partner, MP Fairweather, who gives him a brief summary of two fundamentally different perspectives on the economy. According to one, a healthy and prosperous economy hinges on large-scale production and its ability to sell material, machinery-made products to large markets, such as in the manner of Japan selling Sony and Mitsubishi products to China. In this account, the contemporary British economy is lagging behind the economies of its competitors because its production capacity is not strong enough. According to the other perspective, however, the British economy is doing very well because it has focused its resources on the service industry, banking, commerce, advertising, and insurance, generating more and more university graduates and a statistically verifiable higher standard of living.[2] Fairweather concludes his lecture by refusing to answer which perspective is better and encouraging Gabriel

to approach their difference with an eye toward the political-financial profit one can derive from each.

When starting to offer his thoughts on the second version of the economic situation, Fairweather creates contrast through the phrase "a different kind of reality" (320). It is not a rhetorical transition. I read it as a strong indication of the novel's simultaneous interest in the ghosts (specters that arrive from another reality) that populate post-millennial London and in the prevailing economic order (which operates via correspondingly immaterial, highly complex structures) that generates wealth in the metropolis and beyond.[3]

Additionally, the concept of a "different kind of reality" arises during Gabriel's visits (either physically or through remembering) with his family. On these occasions, not only do generational differences and a stark city-countryside contrast unfold but also the story of his dying father, which is interspersed with stories and memories of his mother's madness, keeps reverting to questions of the economy. Gabriel's father, Ted, favors the first economic narrative and sees a decaying England around him, and while Gabe genuinely thinks he knows better and that his father is simply unfamiliar with current business conditions in bustling London, his childhood memories and family history, including Ted's career before the 1990s, haunt him with a force that causes Gabriel to experience bouts of frequent vertigo.

Ali's ambitious condition-of-England novel offers a spectral take on its main theme, which is both the liquid modernity (in Zygmunt Bauman's sense of the phrase) of the early 2000s and the failed mourning (in Mark Fisher's sense of the phrase[4] in *Capitalist Realism*) of the shattered social and economic hopes that characterized the 1970s and 1980s, the period when Gabriel was a child and that exemplifies, in Ted's eyes, a positive alternative to the increasingly incomprehensible neoliberal present. Gabriel's memories, together with his sister's and aunt's stories about the past, indicate—mainly through recollections of hierarchical, masculine work culture, a highly restrictive domestic role for housewives that triggered his mother's depression, the wide acceptance of racial intolerance, and especially the illusionary nature of the proudly and variously used term "community"—that all was not well in this era. Yet Ted refuses to

stop idealizing his past and remains locked in melancholia. His acute sense of loss exemplifies what several commentators note about early twenty-first-century fiction and film in the UK: capturing contemporary culture necessarily entails a return to the immediate past and an engagement, as Katy Shaw and Mark Fisher persuasively argue,[5] with the specters of this past. Certain objects that Ted owns are compared to objects in a museum (Ali, *In the Kitchen* 365); Ted's head is compared to a skull (388); Gabriel's deceased mother appears in his dreams about the hotel catacombs (490); and the figure of the rag-and-bone man, with whom his mother had strange dealings decades ago, makes a reappearance (or so Gabriel thinks), with his horse and cart, in the busy traffic in a contemporary and distinctly touristy London:

> The bus hummed its way up Bridge Street, the sky watery blue over the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben sounding noontime, baleful as a knell. . . . Tourists in cagoules and sunglasses littered the pavement. The window creaked as Gabe rested his head against the pane. And then he saw it, a rag-and bone-cart, and he twisted his neck and looked and looked until the bus turned into Parliament Square. Did you see it? he wanted to say. Did you see the man, the horse, the blinkers, the way the fetlocks shook? Did you see the pile of old clothes, the television, the toaster, the vegetable rack? (169)

Besides being an unlikely reminder of a strange episode from Gabriel's family history, the scene, with its emphasis on crude materiality and lurid visibility, is an ironic literalization of the tension between quite different types of economic exchange. The rag-and-bone dealer can be understood as a quintessential trader with clear ties to production. Yet times have so changed that such a figure makes an odd spectacle against the background of money and consumption as signaled by the dull, monotonous movement of tourists and passengers. Unlike the rag-and-bone man, who invites the curiosity of onlookers, the source of real money in Central London is, despite the spectacles it may or may not produce, so complex, indirect, and disembodied that it is no longer associated with recognizable, distinct human faces—not even

with objects. As Ted bitterly notes, contemporary Britain is a country of neither producers nor traders in a more conventional sense of the word: "When we were the workshop of the world we sold to everywhere and we'd a healthy surplus" (260). Instead, they are a "nation of consumers" (260) supported by the "invisibles" of "banking and finance and advertising" (261). Thus, the presence of the Gothic in the novel is at once connected to a *laissez-faire*, globally expanding neoliberal capitalism and, as I argue below, to questions about the economy. Which economic-political account is more accurate? To what extent do actual economic forces and political conditions allow themselves to be known? Gabe sways between the influence of his father and that of his business partner, and while he is capable of but little analysis of his own, he experiences not only the appeal of both but also the realization that the recent shift to a predominantly neoliberal regime has resulted in an unfinished, inconclusive conversation with the recent past.

To understand how and why *In the Kitchen* uses Gothic imagery and situations in its portrayal of consumerism and a roaring economy, one can consult another, later conversation between Gabriel and Fairweather. In discussing the absence of political will to better protect so-called agency workers—people who are hired by an agency to work for someone else and usually come from outside the UK—Fairweather explains, "There's a constant pressure to decrease costs. The old union model of labour is dead and gone. You've got longer and longer chains of sub-contracting and outsourcing, and employers want to buy labour as they buy other commodities—supplies which they can turn on and off as necessary without raising the unit price" (421). Politicians are therefore reluctant to implement tighter regulation because they have to "think about what business wants . . . and what consumers demand" (421). Fairweather's wording is revealing: when costs of production become nearly invisible through complex chains of outsourcing, the economy will inevitably require the work of people who are not only minimally paid but also often invisible (in cellars, basements, brothels, off-the-radar agricultural fields) because of the insufficiently documented, illegal nature of their employment. As Okwe, the main character in Stephen Frears' *Dirty Pretty Things* (a film also set in the horror chambers of a London hotel),

says to a wealthy customer about himself and his fellow migrant workers: "[W]e are the people you do not see."

Indeed, a large segment of the novel's Gothic orientation involves immigrants with varied legal backgrounds (with or without a work permit) whose labor is needed to fuel the economy.[6] They are all, to use Silvia Caporale-Bizzini's term, "disposable" migrants (586). The death of Yuri, the Ukrainian night-porter, launches the novel. After his corpse is discovered, the possibility of foul play lingers, but once it is established that he fell while intoxicated, the narrator's attention focuses on Yuri's status in the UK and the hotel, as well as the nightmares that Gabriel has as a result of confronting the dead body. Gabriel's main source of information about the deceased Ukrainian is fellow worker Nikolai, who explains to Gabriel that Yuri was originally an engineer. This background creates a parallel between Yuri and the bonded laborer with high-level mathematical training that Gabriel encounters later on at an illegal farm (the site of a type of modern slavery where workers are trapped and forced to work for no or minimal wages). Through its evocation of the social immobility that often awaits documented and undocumented migrant workers, Yuri's placement in the catacombs translates him into a Gothic figure of physical entrapment and live burial. Additional immigrant figures supplement the uncanny or supernatural, confirming the link between migrancy and the conventions of the global Gothic. These characters include Benny, the well-spoken, conscientious, and motivated kitchen employee who is eventually revealed to be the protagonist of a story he tells in third-person of a child-soldier in Africa who plays football with a woman's head. They also include some of the hotel maids and servers whose trafficking (it is implied that they are being forced to work as prostitutes) places them in one of the secret rooms in the building. When one of the servers claims, during a reception, to come from Romania, a guest cracks flirtatious jokes about vampires. The joke might be innocent were it not delivered by Fairweather, who the novel suggests exploits and abuses women.

Lena is the character who most embodies the novel's combined interest in migrancy, commodification, and the Gothic. According to the story she slowly shares with Gabriel, she is originally from Belorussia, a

poor country with a tragic contemporary history. She was eager to see the larger world beyond her hometown and accepted a deceptive job offer that promised her work in Italy. Instead, she was forced to work in a London brothel; when she successfully ran away, she found temporary work as a dishwasher and, through the help of fellow Eastern European Yuri, shelter in the catacombs of the Imperial Hotel. Described by Ali as "[d]isembodied" (110) and "cadaverous" (106), Lena strikes Gabriel as someone not fully belonging to this world. The narrator observes their first proper meeting: "A streetlamp shrugged a sodium glow over the girl, and he had the sensation she was floating in the circle of orange light" (103). Gabriel sees her as a "ghost" (168), a "waif" (412), and a "graveyard statue" (160), someone who appears in the "will-o'-the-wisp" (412) and might vanish instantaneously. Thus, owing to her "doubtful" "physical presence" (412), Gabriel "ha[s] the sensation that if he reached out his hand it would pass straight through her" (300); he feels that "if he put his hand in the bath and stirred she would dissolve" (356) and "that she could vanish simply by walking through the door and never coming back (412–13).

This imagery does more than just create an eerie atmosphere. Although almost all of Lena and Gabriel's interactions take place in the latter's home, several details continue to connect the hotel to her strange invisibility. Before her first scene in the novel, a commis chef describes her as a member of the kitchen staff who "pass[es] under doors . . . [and is] so thin she hard to see" (23); later, when Gabriel reflects on her fundamental unknowability during their brief cohabitation, he concludes that unlike in his hotel office, where processing information in spreadsheets leads to positive results, collecting information about the girl does not, in itself, lead to real knowledge about her (357). Beyond these moments, the novel contains a darker and older narrative about rape that has implications for Lena's tragic sojourn in London. This emerges in the opening of the second chapter, which presents a checkered history of the fictional Imperial Hotel that reports instances of statutory rape in the 1920s, including a (fictional) celebrity of the era. Although the emphatically childlike Lena is not raped in the hotel, the unfolding human-trafficking scheme within the building and Fairweather's possible

involvement in Lena's actual rape inevitably evoke memories of these earlier atrocities and define the Imperial Hotel as a place of violence that spans several historical eras and economic cultures. Ultimately, the novel's description of Lena suggests that her invisibility as a formerly locked-up victim of prostitution and an insufficiently documented kitchen hand is linked to the spectral invisibility of her Gothic body.

"What business wants" and "what consumers demand" are vague yet unsettling phrases in the novel that direct attention not only to the economic element of migrant lives but also—to return to the aforementioned conflicting diagnoses of the present state of developed Western economies—to the unknowable and therefore frightening modes and depths of post-Fordist production, which strives to meet insatiable consumer demands. According to *In the Kitchen*, the urge to consume more than necessary generates horror. This worldview locates the contemporary Gothic in both the dark heart of outright greed and the unknowability of the origin of certain products and services. The novel's sense of excess is a key component of global capitalism which, as Emily S. Davis concisely formulates, is based on "a system that demands surplus, produces ghosts, turns people into objects, disrupts linear time, and offers extravagant pleasures with high costs" (105). As a global city, *In the Kitchen's* London appears as a monstrous animal: it is "all belly, its looping, intestinal streets constantly at work, digesting, absorbing, excreting, fuelling and refuelling" (Ali 309). In this setting, the drive to acquire, own, or trade various products is a prerequisite for sustaining life itself. Take, for instance, Gabriel's other business partner, Rolly. Because of his frequent display of abundant saliva, Rolly cuts a vampirical figure, similar to the wealthy type that appears, for example, in Anne Rice's fiction and can "survive only by consumption of both blood and material goods" (Sonser 4). After linking the novel's blood imagery with the theme of insatiable greed, Ali makes, in a somewhat comic twist, even the physical existence of Rolly's wife conditional upon consumption: "'Tell you what Geraldine's good at—spending,' said Rolly. 'Used to be amateur, when I met her, now she's turned into a pro. *I have to have*. What does that mean? I say to her, Geraldine, if you can't buy it are you going to go up in a puff of smoke?'" (*In the Kitchen* 143; emphasis in original).

This association of the idea of consumption with the idea of life—so inherent to the culture of modernity—is not limited to the novel's obviously greedy characters. Charlie, who is Gabriel's fiancée until she finds out about his affair with Lena, tells a story about her reaction to a perceived terrorist threat while riding the subway. Assuming she's stuck in a carriage where a bomb is about to go off, she slips into what she admits is a ridiculous fantasy that shows a deep conceptual affinity with the alternative that I just described of either consuming or going up (in this case literally) in a puff of smoke:

> I had the weirdest mix of big and tiny thoughts. It was like, if I'm going to die right now have I been doing the right things—have I been living enough? And then if I live I have to start doing all the right things straight away, choose better, be smarter, know what I really want. Do you know what I decided? Sitting there, terrified by this non-existent bomb? I decided I was going to upgrade my fish oil tablets—go for a more expensive kind, the Omega 3 mix. . . . Some people see God in their moments of crisis, but not me, not people like me—we get consumer insights. (189)

The fact that Ali extends her Gothic imagery to almost all of her characters suggests not so much her interest in a specific form of evil (crucially, it is left undecided whether Fairweather is indeed one of Lena's victimizers) but her interest in how counterintuitive and ubiquitous evil can be. It manifests in places one would not expect it—for example, behind the glamour of expensive urban living. Therefore, the novel depicts cultural and economic conditions that permit the emergence of evil conditions that are both omnipresent and difficult to confront or even track down. (Consider, for example, the various types of highly complex outsourcing that may involve bonded and, in the case of international trade, child labor.) Not coincidentally, the Gothic dimension of *In the Kitchen* contains not only powerful spectral symbolism but also a theme of unknowability.

Indeed, one reason why Ali's work can be seen as a contemporary Gothic novel is its strong emphasis on the ontological insecurity

experienced by the main character. Given the relatively straightforward narrative method in the novel, labelling *In the Kitchen* a postmodernist text may be debatable, yet with the often-noted overlap between the postmodern and the Gothic, the questions that Brian McHale finds the most urgent in postmodern literatures—"Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (10)—easily recall Gabriel's deep disorientation in the novel's first paragraph:

> When he looked back, he felt that the death of the Ukrainian was the point at which things began to fall apart. He could not say that it was the cause, could not say, even, that it was a cause, because the events which followed seemed to be both inevitable and entirely random, and although he could piece together a narrative sequence and take a kind of comfort in that, he had changed sufficiently by then to realize that it was only a story he could tell, and that other stories were not, on the whole, to be trusted. Nevertheless, he fixed the beginning at that day of the Ukrainian's death, when it was the following day on which, if a life can be said to have a turning point, his own began to spin. (Ali, *In the Kitchen* 9)

Also relevant for the question of a novel's genre are the accompanying concepts of secrecy and the resulting inability on the part of the reader to reconstruct events as they really happened. Gabriel senses, and sometimes knows about, the existence of various criminal activities and networks inside and outside the Imperial Hotel, yet he remains unable to establish who plays exactly what role. Lena's story is also full of gaps: while she is clearly a victim of human trafficking, a lingering sense of criminality surrounds her until the very end (when she indeed disappears with Gabriel's money). In addition, Gabriel seems to be in the dark about his own position in the surrounding corruption. As I argue below, in his relationship with Lena he alternates between being charitable and being exploitative, thus symbolically siding with human traffickers who otherwise disgust him. His inability to sufficiently know others, to know the gray areas of the contemporary British economy

and, perhaps most importantly, to know himself, render him unable to speak or act with conviction and integrity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that Gothic novels are "like Watergate transcripts. The story gets through, but in a muffled form, with a distorted time sense, and accompanied by a kind of despair about any direct use of language" (13). In Ali's novel, hardly anything is settled: some people from the hotel are arrested in the end, but neither the questions about Lena nor the ones about the British economy are resolved.

Sedgwick also explores the motif of the "live burial" (3); several of the meanings she associates with it have a complex affinity with the novel's story about the horrors of human trafficking and bonded labor. Thus, Sedgwick's notion of the "unspeakable" can evoke how traumatized Lena remains silent about some extreme form of abuse possibly perpetrated by Fairweather. Additionally, Sedgwick suggests that "in many instances, conditions outside the imprisoning wall simply duplicate the conditions within" (23).

In this sense, Lena's life as a sex worker during her imprisonment in a brothel can be seen as analogous with (or a continuation of) her work as a half-legal dishwasher living in the basement of a hotel and with her subsequent efforts to sexually compensate Gabriel for allowing her to stay in his flat (where nobody from the outside world "interfere[s]" and, if he preferred, he "could lock her up for a month and no one would know" [Ali, *In the Kitchen* 119]). These practices (prostitution, half-legal hotel work, self-prostitution) are economic activities whose coherence confirms, despite critics' complaints about the novel pursuing too many topics, Sedgwick's claim about the fundamental oneness of Gothic spaces.

Supplementing Lena's tragic story is the less detailed yet structurally important story of Yuri, the night-porter, which adds much to the novel's sense of an all-pervading, airless enclosure. According to Michael Perfect, Ali drew inspiration for this character from an article by Steven Morris, published in *The Guardian* on 1 January 2004, about a forty-seven-year-old Ukrainian employee at Café Royal (part of a five-star hotel on Regent Street) who died in an accidental fall in

the "sub-basement" (Morris) of the building where he had secretly been living for an extended period of time (Perfect 133). As in the novel, this real-life case looked like a criminal case for some time until detectives established what was going on. Like Yuri, the worker was found naked, which was probably because of the nearby boilers. Those quoted in the article describe an almost literal live burial: the place was "very claustrophobic because of the low ceilings and very narrow corridors" (Morris). Both in the novel and in the Café Royal case, the migrant's incarceration in a "shadowy world" (Morris) unfolds in contrast to wealth and mobility. While the real-life "Yuri" died shortly after the hotel hosted a high-end Christmas dinner, the fictive Yuri's death occurs in late October, during Gabriel's preparation for a large-scale end-of-the-year show and party for the crystal and jewelry company Sirowsky (a fictive variant on the actual company Swarovski). This detail highlights the motif of personal limitations in the larger context of international economic freedom and mobility. The deceased Café Royal employee was hired by the agency Emprise Services (a name that emits similar colonial echoes as the novel's Imperial Hotel) and found work and a subterranean home in a hotel managed by the potent Le Meridien Group. Ali names Zygmunt Bauman as a source in her acknowledgements (556); Bauman suggests that the theme of less privileged people's enforced immobility (or live burial) unfolds though the contradiction between the mobility late capitalism grants private companies and the restrictions it imposes on a wide range of individual workers (Bauman, *Culture* 39).

The skull fracture suffered by the deceased Ukrainian worker and the fictive Yuri recalls the imagery of the fractured vertebra that Giorgio Agamben discusses admiringly in his *Nudities*. In his chapter entitled "What Is the Contemporary?" his answer to the question refers to Osip Mandelstam's 1923 poem "The Century" in which the poet suggests, in Agamben's reading, that contemporaneity can declare itself only through a kind of fracture. Agamben describes the rift as "*a disjunction and an anarchism*" (11; emphasis in the original), the contemporary poet's ability to see "the darkness of his time" (14) and to "put . . . [this time] in relation to other times" (18).[7] The highly metaphorical quality of Agamben's language demonstrates both the poet's will and the

poet's inability to capture and understand a chaotic, fleeting, and shadowy present. This vision and imagery evoke *In the Kitchen*'s characters who suffer from vertigo and experience the simultaneity of other times with the fast-changing, fluid present. These characters include Gabriel and his father as well as non-Western characters who originate from countries with radically different histories of social and economic development—mainly the Eastern European and African kitchen workers. These newcomers to the grey zones of early twenty-first-century capitalism can adjust to the demands these economies impose only through trauma, displacement, or—as Yuri's and Lena's examples show—literal fracture or other bodily harm. To intensify this sense of ill-fittingness, Ali chooses, in a further echo of Agamben's essay, to place highly educated migrants in menial jobs; for example, the Ukrainian Nikolai is well-read and might also be, Gabriel imagines, a man of political action: "He was like . . . some underground revolutionary leader, watching and waiting, biding his time" (Ali, *In the Kitchen* 128). Part of the Gothic tension in the novel arises from a narrative compression of a wide array of historical temporalities. These historical planes can collide only in imperfect ways, and those individuals (often with a non-Western background) who are caught up in their intersections are bound to be exposed, as in Agamben's writing, to shadowy darkness, even bodily fragmentation.

III. Dealing with the Ghost: Altruism and its Limitations

In a chapter of *Nudities* titled "On the Uses and Disadvantages of Living Among Specters," Agamben reinforces an affinity of vision between his and Ali's work and also articulates the central ethical predicament in *In the Kitchen*: "[T]he dead are perhaps the most demanding objects of love" (Agamben 39). How is one to relate to the ghostly creatures that populate the labor markets in even the most advanced economies?

As Jopi Nyman and co-authors Chiara Battisti and Sidia Fiorato argue, Gabriel undergoes a transformation in his awareness of the migrant work force in and beyond the hotel. Nyman finds that the chef experiences a "reconstruction of his identity with an ethical component" (in other words, he acquires a moral sensitivity he did not have before)

and gains, as a result, a stronger sense of community (228). Battisti and Fiorato contend that Gabriel's "inner journey" enables him to realize his "sociopolitical responsibility for others" (134). However, Nyman's analysis is mostly limited to Gabriel's gradual recognition of the complex humanity of employees in the kitchen. No truly pressing moral dilemmas arise in this milieu; therefore, nothing challenges the ethical foundations of the capitalist corporate structure that makes the profitable running of the kitchen possible. As a result, Battisti and Fiorato's observation remains valid: "[Gabriel's] attitude towards the kitchen staff can be defined as one of exploitation, reproducing [the power imbalance] between foreigners as servants/producers of food and British people as consumers of food" (129). This inability, or unwillingness, to opt out of an exploitative work system does not bode well for the chef's attempt to help Lena.

Ali shapes her novel in such a way that this sense of a near miss (Gabriel develops altruistic impulses but fails to achieve as much as he envisions) repeats itself in Gabriel's interactions with Lena. Their strange affair focalizes other concerns in the story. On the one hand, Lena's dishwashing position in the hotel indicates her kinship with the other displaced kitchen staff; on the other hand, her distance from the others and especially from Gabriel (who, upon their first meaningful contact, only vaguely remembers seeing her once before) can be construed as a narrative-artistic marking of the radical engagement her situation calls for. This young woman is the most in need of help, and at the same time, she is the most difficult person to help. It is through his relationship with Lena that the nature and the consequences of Gabriel's compassionate procedure to shelter and protect the migrant woman unfold, highlighting broader questions about the presence and character of compassion in modern Western societies that prize individualism and competitiveness and a certain kind of self-centeredness.

Gabriel offers food and shelter to the distressed Lena, makes certain efforts to find the person she claims is her brother, attempts to recover her savings, and even turns a blind eye when her guest walks away with much of his own savings. However, this generosity is tainted, from the very beginning, by instances of Gabriel's sometimes unconscious

sexual exploitation of Lena. The most emblematic example of this strange co-presence of compassion and self-centered pleasure-seeking occurs when Gabriel begins to perform a ritual foot-washing on his ghostly protégé (Ali, *In the Kitchen* 359). With its strong cultural roots in Christianity, foot-washing is not only an "expression of hospitality" but also evokes (the voluntary inversion of) master and slave relations (Allison 322). In Gabriel's home, this inversion is yet again inverted, leading to another sex scene with Lena who, Gabriel senses, engages in sex not as a matter of desire but as a matter of exchange and contractual obligation. Caporale-Bizzini observes that "society's economic values render the balance of power unequal" (590). This remains valid for the strange couple throughout the narrative: even when Gabriel and Lena could—even if only temporarily and strictly within their relationship—free themselves from the various transactional ties and obligations in which they are permanently entangled, their unceasing awareness of standard exchange mechanisms in the external world prevents them from doing so.

Indeed, the cultural-geographical base of the novel's plot means that most of the encounters between characters are impacted by economic differences. London is a global financial hotspot where, as Immanuel Wallerstein notes about globalized locations, everything, including social relations, is commodified (78). As Derrida and others with an interest in "hauntology"[8] claim, it is precisely this smooth, flat, and seemingly atemporal condition—in which the origin, past history, and non-economic value of things and people are hardly perceived—that calls for the appearance of the ghost. Effecting a "desychroniz[ation] of time" (Laclau 87), a "non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present," the "specter of the past" (Derrida xix) disrupts that sense of forward-pointing and homogenous present time that smooth-running global trade (with its tendency to conceal the true cost and origin of commodities) can suggest. Thus, sharing a close affinity with Derrida's vision, Ali populates her hotel kitchen in post-millennial, glamourous London with a crew whose displacement and historically rooted personal tragedies almost literally reproduce the French philosopher's examples of ghosts: "victims of war, political and other kinds of violence,

nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism" (Derrida xix). And when Derrida, referencing Karl Marx's work and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, claims that "everything begins by the apparition of a spectre" (4), we are reminded of *In the Kitchen*'s opening sentence: "[T]he death of the Ukrainian was the point at which things began" (Ali 9). Indeed, this encounter with the (un)dead marks not only the start of a fascinating storyline but also the unfolding of an ethical imperative to recognize relatedness to, and even assume responsibility for, the ghost.

This is indeed a "most demanding" (Agamben 39) task, and Gabriel is only partially successful. By highlighting, sometimes comically, the frequent language-related barriers between Gabriel and Lena, the novel offers an almost stagy version of how hauntology defines the challenges of a truly compassionate attitude toward unexpected visitors from an uncomfortable history: we need to "learn to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company" (Derrida xviii; emphasis in original); we "have to talk to [the specter] graciously[,] . . . we have to learn how it speaks and offer it a hospitable reception" (Gordon 208). Patient as he is, Gabriel never manages to trigger true dialogue with Lena, and beyond the obvious social-cultural and generational differences, the problem of reciprocity and obligation further inhibits a real conversation. The encounter with the metaphorical undead should be, Derrida insists, pure "hospitality without reserve, welcoming salutation [to] the *arrivant* from whom . . . one will not ask anything in return" (81; emphasis in original). Ali's good Samaritan offers a helping hand to a victim of abuse but also sexually exploits her.

Why is it that Gabriel cannot succor the ghost? To many readers it may seem that, in the absence of a strong moral or religious conviction, he lets Lena go too easily at the end of the novel. His relief at her departure is palpable. Seeking emotional safety, he tries to reunite with his former lover Charlie; their conversation in the final few lines of the novel rehearses a food-love analogy. Even if the congeniality of these two realms is at least as old as Plato and his *Banquet*, the parallel between eating and copulating evokes the novel's previous association of food as highly sophisticated merchandise and various forms of human

trafficking, including prostitution. At this point, Gabriel no longer mourns his loss of Lena; instead, he reverts to a world he knows well: that of consumerist choices.

Indeed, the global-neoliberal setting of the novel may at least partly explain the eventual collapse, or at least clear weakening, of the main character's compassion. Gabriel decides to help Lena not just in the hotel but rather through the hotel, in the sense that his benevolent impulses are defined by the type of work he performs in the Imperial Hotel and has been planning to perform in a new, upscale restaurant in a business district in London. If anything, his job as a chef is a manifestation of meaningful work in a consumerist context because it is the sort of work that "comes first and foremost under aesthetic [and not ethical] scrutiny. Its value is judged by its capacity to generate pleasurable experience" (Bauman, *Work* 33). This aesthetic dimension has to do with an important consumerist principle: the freedom to choose, to maneuver among possibilities that are full of "[s]eduction, display[s] of untested wonders, promise[s] of sensations yet untried" (Bauman, *Work* 31). Seen from this angle, Gabriel may have exercised his rights as a consumer and had an affair with Lena for the sake of variety, as unfaithful individuals sometimes frame their actions, comparing themselves to shoppers. But more important than this is that Gabriel's compassion also bears the traces of a fundamentally consumerist approach. By demonstrating this, Ali highlights that the seemingly autonomous sphere of individual human emotions—sometimes including the noblest emotions—is not free from broader societal processes.

As Karl Wuthnow claims, there is a difference between being driven by ethical or religious obligations and being prompted by desire for some subjectively experienced reward, be it a sense of personal fulfilment, self-worth, or perceived difference from those who do not care (83). Or, as Lauren Berlant's diagnosis of contemporary compassion in the West establishes, this feeling state is to be studied as "a social and aesthetic technology of belonging and not an organic emotion" (5). In other words, in the absence of moral or religious principles, or compelling social or political causes, compassionate behavior is often conducted as an expression of personal preferences.

When Gabriel tries to explain to himself why he gave shelter to Lena, he is unable to identify his reasons (nor can he reference a moral code by which he acted). The confusion displayed by his language highlights a link between moral-emotional behavior and economic flows, which Riccardo Petrella contends are geared "towards the production of the ephemeral and the volatile" in the contemporary world (qtd. in Bauman, *Work* 28). One decides to help, he suggests, as spontaneously as one may decide to purchase a particular item:

> Why did she come to him, anyway? *Had* she come to him? One look they had exchanged in the catacombs, what could one look mean? How much? Did she look at him, then, the way he thought she had? They had only seen each other for a second or two, the rest he had made up, invented now, tonight, because he was—what—lonely? Had he been lonely? Or was that something he had just now begun to feel? Was she making him lonely? It didn't make any sense. (Ali, *In the Kitchen* 110–11; emphasis in original)

Gabriel's associative discourse can be read as a rhetorical reproduction of the instability of his commitment to a moral cause that initially seemed compelling. He reduces his decision to help to a matter of momentary preference and his project to rescue Lena comes to an end too easily because, to adopt Herman Melville's language in "Bartleby" (another story about the delicate intersections of charitable impulses and capitalist pressures), he preferred to help Lena upon their very first encounter. Even though he goes an admirable extra mile, in the coda of the novel he prefers not to make further efforts in that direction.

IV. Conclusion

In the Kitchen justifies several reviewers' sense of being overwhelmed by a large number of thematic engagements, but it does not account for the related complaints about incoherence. The novel explores the complex intersections of elements such as the global urban economy, the Gothic twilight dimming neoliberal glitz and glamour, and contemporary dimensions of care and compassion. While the first of these themes has

received considerable critical attention (with insights that overlap with academic commentary on *Brick Lane* and its focus on issues like women's wage employment and the global movement of labor from non-Western countries),[9] the impact of work and consumption in neoliberal cities on human subjectivity remains a challenge to interpret. The Gothic is a literary mode that records the refashioning of subjectivity partly because of its "ability to give voice to the occluded truths of our age" (Blake and Monnet 1). *In the Kitchen* is explicitly concerned with excess, insatiability, commodity fetishism, and compulsive consumption in relation to abuse and violence. Gabriel's relationship with Lena demonstrates that pity and compassion ultimately fall victim to consumerist ephemerality and exploitative practices. As a result, Ali's ghosts continue to tease and disappear, and benevolent impulses to help them remain inseparable from the social and economic pressures that have created them.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was funded by Károli Gáspár University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences ("Cosmopolitan Ethics and the Modern City" project 20722B800).

Notes

1 Especially present in the Caribbean and Canadian cultural imaginations, the figure of the soucouyant has particular relevance for the aesthetic-representational shift from more traditional forms of the Gothic to post-millennial, globally rooted narratives of fright: while the ghost is likely to be thought of as locally rooted, the mobile soucouyant operates along a "network," a "route over roots" (Giselle Liza Anatol qtd. in Illott 21).

2 In the terminology of Bauman, a theorist who influenced Ali, the debate is about whether Britain is a predominantly "producer society" or a "consumer society" (Bauman, *Culture* 24).

3 While Ali is not usually read as a Gothic author, to note that authors often draw on Gothic forms to depict significant shifts from one prevailing economic order to another is not a new idea in Gothic studies.

4 Associated mainly with Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the concept of failed mourning designates incomplete or inadequate processing of grief over death or, by extension, over the end of something valuable. This phenomenon is central to Fisher's work, especially in his influential *Capitalist Realism* where, though the phrase is not actually used, he often reflects (especially in the first two chapters of the book) on generational differences and how the pressures and accelerated

tempo of the neoliberal world prevent people from properly articulating their grief over the loss of certain social and political hopes or ideals.

5 See Shaw and Fisher. Both authors discuss modes and possibilities of cultural interplay between past and present and argue that these temporal levels can never be fully separated.

6 As Pereira notes, even though the hotel as "a trope for transnational British society . . . is not a new theme in present-day British literature or in Ali's own fiction . . . this novel presents a particularly plural vision of the transnational metropolis" (78). Perfect finds—despite his criticism of Ali's "too strong a desire to [write] an all-encompassing state-of-the-nation novel" (137)—that this interest in pluralism results in a praiseworthy interrogation, rather than celebration, of multiculturalism in Britain (137).

7 Similar to Agamben's reliance on vertebra imagery to register historical change, Appadurai uses bodily terms, specifically the vertebrate in its combination with the cellular, to capture disjunctive but interdependent modes of legal-transparent and criminal-invisible operations within the global economy that seem thoroughly different but are in fact very similar (Appadurai 21–31). Correspondingly, *In the Kitchen* not only condenses different phases of various national histories into the image of the fractured, grotesque human body but also conceptualizes, through its evocation of Appadurai's understanding of globalization, the parallel workings of transnational commerce in its public, lawful, and comprehensible dimension and its illicit, exploitative, and violent one.

8 Partly rooted in philosophy and partly in psychoanalysis, hauntology is a relatively new critical concept that is interested in the contemporary world's fixation on the recent past which, metaphorically speaking, haunts the present. Derrida's insights (especially the ones articulated in his *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*) are foundational contributions to the rise of this kind of academic (and in many cases also popular) enquiry. For a good overview, see Shaw.

9 For a relevant example of this kind of critical engagement with Ali's *Brick Lane*, see López.

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