

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Postcolonial Recycling of the Oriental Gothic: Habiby's *Saraya, The Ghoul's Daughter* and Mukherjee's *Jasmine*¹

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Introduction

Postcolonial texts seek to profit from Gothic narratives to problematise the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised in a transnational context. Regarding the Third World literature in general, the Gothic tradition is rewritten in accordance with the collective Oriental heritage to articulate the untold stories of the muffled Eastern subject. Drawing on the mythical narratives of the ghouls (ogres) in classical Arabic culture and old Arabic folktales and of Lord Shiva in the Hindu myth, this paper compares the rewritings of the vampire topoi of otherness, unspeakableness, foreignness, and border existences across language and identity in both Emile Habiby's *Saraya, The Ghoul's Daughter* (1991) and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989). The metamorphosis of Saraya into a laughing muse and Jasmine into a potent goddess can be taken to represent the liminal state of Dracula between life and death on the one hand and the convergence of cultures on the other. Where these two works differ principally is in the geographic location of this site of cultural interaction. Whereas Habiby (1922–1996), the Palestinian writer, traces the predicament of Arabs in Israel and the Palestinian diaspora, Mukherjee (1940–), the Indian American writer, writes of the potential synthesis of Indian and American culture in a transnational context. The mythical nameless horror of both the Arabic ghouls and the Indian lord Shiva is thus rewritten to counter the taboo on articulating the resentment of the victim/colonised vis-à-vis the brutality of the victimiser/coloniser. Postcolonial texts attempt to appropriate the Western Gothic trope to represent native subject matter and perspective without slipping into the dominant discourse. This paper considers these two postcolonial works in terms of counter-Orientalist discourse that simultaneously deconstructs Orientalist exoticism and eroticism and constructs a counter-image of Oriental agency as put to use at different geopolitical and historical contexts. Postcolonial writing recuperates the agency of the foreign other through deploying the oral and the metafictional in the Gothic genre to write back to the colonial canonisation of literacy and written culture. Both the Gothic and the oral are similar, as both have been excluded from the written scripts of the dominant. According to Smith and Hughes, the postcolonial Gothic genre contests the western dominant humanist discourse of the rational and the human by 'raising often difficult questions about what it means to be human.'²

The Oriental Gothic and the Postcolonial

The connection between the Gothic and the postcolonial is inescapable in a transnational culture governed by a hyper-real universe that presents itself as its own simulation. Popular Culture representations of otherness in relation to the ghostly and

¹ This is a revised version of an essay presented at the International Conference on *Revisiting O Mito / Recycling Myths* held in the Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon, Portugal, from 2 to 5 May, 2012

² Andrew Smith and William Hughes, *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre* (Gordonville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 2.

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the demonic are intrinsically associated with an exquisite amalgam of the imagery of Eurocentrism, imperialism, and neocolonialism. Gothic fiction is, thus, comparatively linked up with simulacra and simulation. Fred Botting, for instance, asserts that as Gothic joins ‘a world of simulation, its artifices are redoubled. Ghosts, phantasms, vampires, doubles proliferate, throwing up recycled shapes of haunted modernity, giving old form to new fears.’³ Put differently, an uneven transnational development has created a transnational class of the dispossessed who are reduced in the global imaginary to a threatening cultural other. By comparison, in the realm of literary studies, the intermeshing of the Gothic and the postcolonial or rather the dominance of Gothic motifs in postcolonial fiction has been critically surveyed with special regard to the prevalence of otherness. David McInnis, for instance, observes: ‘At the heart of the Gothic is an engagement with the unrepresented other, usually a monster or a madwoman, in the same way that at the heart of postcolonial writings is an attempt to represent the other, often depicted as subaltern or female.’⁴ Yet such critical analyses study the postcolonial Gothic as primarily mere rewritings or counter-texts of the Western canon of the nineteenth-century *Dracula* or *Fin de siècle* Gothic tradition and thus tend to forget the relative crystallisation of such tropes and their post-colonial specificity on the one hand and their universal significance on the other. For example, Judie Newman pinpoints that the Gothic is a European genre that does not travel well and consequently the postcolonial Gothic runs ‘the risk of slippage from oppositional to surreptitiously collusive positions.’⁵ Such Euro-centric assessment of the Gothic disregards the universal esoteric repertoire of terror and demonology whether in its Western form of the prototypical cult of Dionysus who acts as a divine communicant between the living and the dead or in its Eastern pattern which drives the Yazidi of northeast Iraq to abhor lettuce as the devil’s food.⁶ It concomitantly foregrounds postcolonial strategies of appropriation and downplays those of recuperation. Postcolonial rewriting ironically portrays the tension established between the use of the tools and tropes of dominant discourse and the retrieval of cultural historicity and authenticity.

Thus, it is of paramount significance to espouse ‘a commitment to historicism’ to decode Gothic tropes according to the legacies of different colonial pasts.⁷ In consonance with new Gothic Studies that are pluralist and multi-temporal, this article considers two works which represent ‘the experience of writers writing out of colonised countries, and those who attempt to rationalise the confused and competing power structures and identities that may follow the departure of the absolutist-colonialist’ as adumbrated in the special issue of *Gothic Studies* on ‘Postcolonial Gothic’.⁸ Whereas Emile Habiby represents the first group of postcolonial writers,

³ Fred Botting, ‘Hypocrite Vampire,’ *Gothic Studies* 9.1 (2007) 16.

⁴ David McInnis, ‘Re-orienting the Gothic Romance: Jean Rhys, Tayeb Salih, and Strategies of Representation in the Postcolonial Gothic,’ *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 39.3 (2008) 85, 10 January, 2012 <http://ariel.synergiesprairies.ca/ariel/index.php/ariel/article/view/240/237>

⁵ Judie Newman, ‘Postcolonial Gothic: Ruth Praver Jhabvala and the Sobhraj Case,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 40.1 (1994) 85-6.

⁶ The Yazidi are a Kurdish-speaking people who adhere to a branch of Yazdanism that blends elements of Mithraism, pre-Islamic Mesopotamian religious traditions, Christianity and Islam.

⁷ Philip Holden, ‘The Postcolonial Gothic: Absent Histories, Present Contexts,’ *Textual Practice* 23.3 (2009) 353.

⁸ William Hughes and Andrew Smith, ‘Introduction: Defining the Relationships between Gothic and the Postcolonial,’ *Gothic Studies* 5.2 (2003) 3.

Bharati Mukherjee belongs to the latter. In spite of the apparent difference between Habiby, who chose to stay in Haifa rather than escape with many of his fellow Arabs in the aftermath of the political and psychological crisis caused by the 1948 defeat of Arabs in *Al Nakba* (the catastrophe), and Mukherjee, who immigrated to Canada and then shifted into a celebratory mode as an immigrant, then citizen, in the United States, both suffered from exile, expounded a passionate nostalgia to translate their past into new presentist terms, and advocated a potential cultural exchange between various ethnicities and nationalities. Furthermore, such hybrid subgenre as the postcolonial Gothic is entitled to articulate the polarised categories of postcolonial and transnational third-world identity and history. Fantasy and the supernatural are everyday expressions of the imaginative experiences of Arab and Indian writers who use the Gothic to explore and expose the contradictions within their postcolonial societies, restraints upon people's lives, and most specifically, gender roles. In Arab and Indian postcolonial Gothic works, the supernatural runs alongside realistic factual accounts to critique incongruities, some of which have been generated by either colonial culture or native cultural traditions.

Habiby's three novels, *The Secret Life of Sa'eed the Pessoptimist* (1974), *Ikhtayyeh* (1985), and *Saraya, the Ghoul's Daughter* (1991) provide a satirical and tragic perspective of the complex ways by which Israeli Arabs survived in their homeland under the rule of the Israeli Jewish majority while fighting to recuperate the Arab past and its mythical and metaphysical presence. Habiby was doubly marginalised by both the Israeli majority and his fellow Arab intellectuals. In addition, Habiby was one of the few Palestinian intellectuals to call his people in 1947 to agree to the establishment of two states, an Arab one and a Jewish one. This doubleness is reflected in his narrative oeuvre which interweaves the fantastic with the real, the supernatural with the prosaic, and finally the tragic with the comic. Habiby's work uses irony and the Gothic to reveal the hidden contradictions of the reality of Arabs living in Israel. He deploys Arabic mythical tropes to cast light on tales of the repressed and abused lives of Arabs in their post-colonial state and simultaneously on the potential return or awakening of the dead as represented by the pre-colonial reality of Palestinian and Arab history. The nostalgic fantasies about a pristine past are thus inextricably linked to the real tolerance of colonial atrocities in the present. The two worlds are parallel, their influences leaking into each other, both equally real, equally esteemed. Moreover, the quest for the mythical and Gothic is an efficacious strategy of survival. 'I am,' Habiby claims, 'holding the glory on both ends. I cling to my position without resigning my place. There is a difference between those who are subjected to the whip and those who count the lashes from afar. We in Israel have found our own way, the way of consistency and patience.'⁹

Mukherjee's two books of short stories, *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), and the novels *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993) *Leave It to Me* (1997) *Desirable Daughters* (2002) *The Tree Bride* (2004) are all focused on hyphenated identities and transnational existences. She writes of the complications that result from being thrown between two worlds and the strength and courage it takes to survive and, ultimately, live. Like their author, her characters are alienated in both America and India and yet

⁹ Rachel Feldhay Brenner, 'The Search for Identity in Israeli Arab Fiction: Atallah Mansour, Emile Habiby, and Anton Shammas,' *Israel Studies* 6.3 (2001) 97.

attempt creating robust bonds to new communities that might preclude total inclusion or assimilation. Mukherjee is just as doubly marginalised as Habiby, for she is agonised by the foreignness of her Indian culture in the U.S. and by the violence of the national process in the post-Partition Punjab. Mukherjee comparatively resorts to a double strategy that incorporates native Hindu myth along with the American tropes of the frontier and concurrently exposes the present pains and brutalities inflicted on South Asian immigrants in contemporary North America. Like the Palestinian Emile Habiby, Bharati Mukherjee uses the Gothic to explore hidden histories of repression and abuse and hidden passions of Asian young women. In Mukherjee's *Leave It to Me*, for instance, Devi Dee is portrayed as suffering abandonment by her American mother and Eurasian father in an Indian orphanage in the late 1960s. The story of the young woman who is enraged about the fact that she was thrown out like a garbage sack on the hippie trail is associated with the Hindu mythology of the goddess Devi worshipped in Bengal, who was created by the Cosmic Spirit to do battle with the worst of all the demons, the Buffalo Demon. Devi's torment is relieved by being fused with part of a larger design in which some higher power uses her to restore some kind of balance and purge evil out of California.

However, Mukherjee's use of Indian myth and Gothic has a further function, namely that of creating personal Gothic tales and figures of empowered women. Unlike the second-generation Asian American writers Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan who use Chinese mythology as a kind of roots retrieval, she critiques traditional genderist myths and tales glorifying self-effacing women like that of Sita, Rama's wife that is esteemed as a standard-setter for wifely and womanly virtues for all Hindu women, and rewrites her own fantastic versions of Hindu myth as confirmed in one of her interviews: 'I would like to make up my own myths. As an immigrant I don't have models here in America.'¹⁰ In Mukherjee's imagination, history and nation are in a state of flux that is to be remade and reinvented according to emergent legacies and affinities. Jennifer Drake asserts that Mukherjee has consistently rewritten her Brahmin stable past as an Oriental woman and her vision of home across different cultural and national contexts:

And she exchanges racial invisibility in India for 'minority' status in North America. She gives up a certain kind of home, home-as-comfort, home-as-talisman, exchanging that stable *desh* for imagination's portability, its astonishing and insistent demolitions and reinventions, its work. In Mukherjee's America, 'home' says 'freedom,' 'home' says 'war zone.' 'Home' is no consolation, no place to rest. There are too many Americas and Indias for that.¹¹

Habiby's *Sarayah, the Ghoul's Daughter* attempts to reconcile its Gothic style to the reality of a colonial backdrop. It deploys the trope of the Gothic ghoul that takes Saraya as an adopted daughter by force to represent the confrontation between colonial, patriarchal hegemony and some timeless precolonial essence and authenticity. This rewriting is predicated upon the binaristic motif of female

¹⁰ Shefali Desai, Tony Barnstone, and Bharati Mukherjee, 'A Usable Past: An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee,' *Manoa* 10.2 (1998) 136.

¹¹ Jennifer Drake, 'Looting American Culture: Bharati Mukherjee's Immigrant Narratives,' *Contemporary Literature* 40.1 (1999) 65.

subjugation and empowerment: the central protagonist is a young girl confronted with a masculine Gothic threat of annihilation that is finally eliminated. *Saraya, The Ghoul's Daughter* is fundamentally founded on the Palestinian folktale of the girl called *Saraya* who was kidnapped, adopted like a daughter by a ghoul, imprisoned in his palace and finally saved by her cousin. Habiby accordingly rewrites the traditional ghoul's trope in two ways: first, by shifting the focus of its vampiric malady across gender roles from the female to the male; and second, by transforming the ghoul's cannibalistic and seductive desires toward its victims into patriarchal ones.¹² Such patriarchal trope in Habiby's novel is opposed to the beast and temptress imagery suggested by the figure of the ghoul in classical Arabic culture. In Ahmed Al-Rawi's words, 'the Arabs understood the ghoul to be an ugly female demon that intends to harm travelers and even to kill them in some cases. It has the ability to change its form and become a beautiful woman to attract men or even to mate with them.'¹³ The ghoul's desire to dominate and subsume rather than devour and eliminate *Saraya* must be understood in terms of global power relations. Spivak has already pinpointed the great interested use colonialism makes of patriarchy.¹⁴ That Habiby's text can be linked to patriarchy and colonialism through the ghoul's figure is further verified by the recurrent references stressing the connection between *Saraya*, Palestine, and Mount Carmel. In other words, *Saraya* becomes an allegory of the lost Palestinian identity and the author's yearning to his pre-colonial childhood.

The structure of Habiby's novel is cyclical: it begins and ends with telling different versions of the story of *Saraya* and the ghoul, identified from its first paragraph as an old Palestinian myth. The narrator's reminiscences on a girl with the same name whom he knew in his childhood and who later disappeared into exile with her family take him into his own personal past and the collective psyche of the Palestinians. Generally speaking, Habiby's novels portray women figures as symbol of the motherland and the pre-colonial past. Amit-Kochavi writes, '*Sarayah* and *Ekhtayyeh* both focus on Palestinian women by these names, representing old Palestine, who were the childhood love of the main male hero and are described nostalgically as fairytale figures.'¹⁵ Throughout the novel *Saraya* is represented as linked up with a fantastic ghostly atmosphere that is associated with the homeland, that is to say the post-colonial Palestine. *Saraya*'s association with apparitions serves as indication of the novel's Gothic background. *Saraya* appears to the narrator as an apparition out of the foam of the Mediterranean on the coast of the Palestinian village of al-Zib, north of Acre, as he is fishing on a summer night. Despite such ghostly visitations in Habiby's *khurafiyya* (a fairy tale), it is deeply rooted in the realities of the Palestinian post-colonial history. *Saraya* appears in 1983 during the sixth war

¹² In the session 'myth and postcolonialism' of the *Recycling Myths* conference, the issues of the body, gender and sexual identity and the ways in which they intersect with the vampire and ghoul traditions were further discussed by Professor Marina Warner of the University of Essex and me. In response to her query about the ghoul's gender role, I stressed that Habiby was quite aware of the gender shift that has been created with regard to the ghoul in the novel. From a linguistic perspective, the 'ghoul' is a masculine noun, whereas the 'ghoula' is a feminine one inflected by a female suffix in Arabic. The linguistic feature of masculinity spotlights the dominant gender role of the patriarchal ghoul.

¹³ Ahmed Al-Rawi, 'The Mythical Ghoul in Arabic Culture,' *Cultural Analysis* 8 (2009) 52.

¹⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 416.

¹⁵ Hannah Amit-Kochavi, 'Haifa – Sea and Mountain, Arab Past and Jewish Present, as Reflected by Four Writers,' *Israel Studies* 11.3 (2006) 150.

which was waged by Israel against Lebanon and calls out to him: ‘The homeland longs for its people Abdallah. Have you forgotten about us?’¹⁶ The ghostly presence of Saraya is corroborated through the narrator’s response, which questions whether Saraya has come back alive or dead like the resurrected ghostly souls of the dead.

Habiby further associates the supernatural with the real body politic of the post-colonial homeland by examining the inextricable bond between Saraya and Mount Carmel. Saraya is identified with Mount Carmel which is depicted as an oasis rife with wells and green shady trees: ‘Saraya is as just as real as Mount Carmel and its highly generous flow. One can see, hear, smell, taste and touch both of them simultaneously. She is a palpable rather than an imaginary being’ (52). The extent to which the narrator’s idealised creations of the feminine and native space become visible to the reader relates to his construction of the idyllic love story he develops with Saraya in the Edenic Mount Carmel. Saraya is depicted as used to feeding her lover-narrator the Carmel ‘jinni apples’ and quenching his thirst by letting him drink from its springs (105-06). However fantastic and exotic this narrative strand of the Gothic romance may be, it is inscribed alongside the political and postcolonial. The idyllic image of the narrator’s passionate love for Saraya that is structurally connected to a pre-colonial, uncontaminated Mount Carmel can be considered a strategy of resistance against colonial hegemony and the erasure of Palestinian space and history. The narrator is, on the one hand, appalled by how Mount Carmel’s natural watercourses, trees, bushes, shrubs, and seasonal flowers have been drastically replaced by crowded streets and ugly urban scenes that are compared to dull cemeteries and on the other hand by how the Arabic street names have been replaced by Hebrew ones (107). Amit-Kochavi interprets Habiby’s ironic rewriting of the Carmel’s present against the backdrop of a lost paradise or past in terms of nostalgia for origins and authenticity: ‘Nostalgia for the old Carmel is expressed by Habiby as part of his longing for the Arabs who are gone now, as if the Carmel and Haifa had lost their glamour and beauty once they are no longer frequented by their original natives.’¹⁷ Thus, cultural opposition can be a constructive means of surviving the present and keeping alive the memory of the Palestinians’ connectivity to their land and history.

Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* central protagonist is a young girl confronted with a masculine Gothic threat of annihilation that is finally eliminated. The title character and narrator of Bharati Mukherjee’s novel, was born approximately 1965 in a rural Indian village called Hasnapur. She tells her story as a twenty-four-year-old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. Her long journey encompasses five distinct settings, two murders, at least one rape, a maiming, a suicide, and three love affairs. Throughout the course of the novel, the title character’s identity, along with her name, changes: from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jassy to Jase to Jane. In chronological order, Jasmine moves from Hasnapur, Punjab, to Fowlers Key, Florida (near Tampa), to Flushing, New York, to Manhattan, to Baden, Iowa, and finally is off to California as the novel ends. Prakash, Jasmine’s Indian husband, succeeds in motivating her to question her feudal assumptions about women, marriage and caste and to start restructuring her identity. Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* therefore has a

¹⁶ Emile Habiby, *Saraya Bint el-Goul* (Saraya, the Ghoul’s Daughter) (Amman: Dar al-Shorouk, 1991), 35. Further references to this book will be included in parentheses in the text. Translations from *Saraya* in the present text are mine.

¹⁷ Amit-Kochavi 155

cyclical narrative structure: Jasmine's metamorphosis is marked from beginning to end by the synthesis of Jasmine's life and journey through India and America on the one hand and the Gothic and the postcolonial on the other hand. The postcolonial is incorporated in the appropriation of native Hindu myth along with the western Gothic mode in the new context of South Asian immigrant experience.

As a fictional and rhetorical device, vampirism functions as a transformative process of either passive othering or positive recycling. Whereas both Habiby's and Mukherjee's passive vampirisms are associated with solely the masculine malady and brutality of the Ghoul that kidnaps and imprisons Saraya and Half-Face who rapes Jasmine and steals her sense of innocence and happiness after coming to the USA, their positive version of vampirism is rather affiliated with the female potential of renewal and reshaping. Thus, vampirism is so deeply implicated with sexuality and power structures as to render the three inseparable in the postcolonial Gothic. When she is just seven years old at the beginning of the novel, the young girl Jyoti (Jasmine's given name) is struck on the head by the old astrologer as she vehemently denies the legitimacy of his vision of her future widowhood and exile. Falling to the ground, she remembers, 'My teeth cut into my tongue. A twig sticking out of the bundle of firewood I'd scavenged punched a starshaped wound into my forehead.'¹⁸ The references to the teeth and bleeding indicate the vampiric flourishes which become associated with Jasmine. However, such Gothic references are relocated within the Hindu myth of the third eye, the holiest developed in the middle of their foreheads as recorded in Puranic texts and epics, and Shiva, god of creation and destruction in Hindu myth. Instead of exoticising Jasmine as a Hindu female other who is deemed to suffer widowhood and is consequently expected to devote her life to an austere pursuit of religion and never to attempt remarriage, Jasmine's heterosexual desire is valorised according to the Hindu myth of Shiva that represents the binarism of life and death. Geoffrey Kain affirms the death/rebirth dualism as concretised in the narrative structure as well as in Jasmine's migrant life:

The novel's immediate emphasis on the 'third eye' thus sets the stage for what clearly emerges as the novel's cyclical narrative pattern of destruction and renewal, as well as the characteristic energy of Jasmine's own life: she becomes a force of both creation and destruction in the lives of others, and experiences a series of deaths and rebirths as her identity evolves in her passage from life as Jyoti and the Punjabi villager to Jasmine the questing immigrant enroute to California.¹⁹

Thus, recycling the negative, degenerate vampirism of the canonical nineteenth-century Dracula as positive destruction of the unusable and inauthentic beliefs of Hindu caste and tradition on the one hand and recreation of usable and authentic postcolonial visions and strategies on the other is well represented by Jasmine's cyclical transformation throughout the novel.

¹⁸ Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1989), 1. Further references to this book will be included in parentheses in the text.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Kain, "'Suspended between Two Worlds': Bharati Mukherjee's 'Jasmine' and the Fusion of Hindu and American Myth," *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 28:1/2 (1993) 152.

The Oriental Gothic and Foreignness

Both postcolonial literature and Gothic writing are fundamentally focused on the representation of otherness and foreignness. Tabish Khair points out that Gothic fiction is essentially a 'writing of otherness,' because 'it revolves around various versions of the other, as the Devil or as ghosts, as women, vampires, Jews, lunatics, murderers, non-European presences etc.'²⁰ Furthermore, the fundamental Gothic topoi of vampires, ghouls, ghosts, and monsters can be automatically attached to the colonial discourses of primitivism and cannibalism. A frequent corollary of such attachment is the postcolonial rewriting of the other that is to be textually repositioned as a source of redemption and recreation rather than a locus of destruction and demonisation. The various forms of the foreign and the marginal other are accordingly installed and then destabilised through the employment of sarcasm and irony in Habiby's *Saraya* and female-empowering alternatives in Mukherjee's *Jasmine*.

In the two novels, the discursive interference of colonialism is essentially demonstrated in the representation of native space in terms of menace, barbarity, and foreignness. Space, whether it is Haifa or Palestine in Habiby and Hasnapur or India in Mukherjee, is codified in terms of what Arjun Appadurai calls 'trait' rather than 'process' geographies. According to such typology, 'trait' geographies are telescoped through colonial conceptions of national and regional identity that tend to see areas 'as relatively immobile aggregates of traits, with more or less durable historical boundaries and with a unity composed of more or less enduring properties.'²¹ In Habiby's *Saraya* the romantic setting of the Palestinian sea is transformed into a Gothic Hades in which Israeli soldiers guard 'the state' against the underworld departed souls or 'the darkness ghouls,' namely Palestinians (38). Mukherjee's *Jasmine* comparatively represents how North Americans visualise South Asians as 'Undocumented aliens' (118) and how Asia is viewed as unfamiliar, whether as only 'a soy-bean market' (11) or as a wretched space plagued with poverty and water famines.

Habiby adopts sarcasm as a means of deconstructing essentialist constructs and fundamentalist certainties, whether they are predicated upon national or colonial myths. Both the Arabs' sense of fatalism and Israeli colonialism are hence exposed as detrimental to national identity and history, respectively. Habiby's rewriting can therefore be considered as grounded in revisionist attitudes toward history and culture. Generally speaking, his main goal, as articulated in the 'Author's Preface' to *Saraya*, is to review 'dogmatic certainty' (10). In Habiby's *Saraya*, Gothic horror and ineffable menace are ironically implied through the presence of native Palestinian Arabs, primarily represented by Saraya and other Arab characters. A central preoccupation of Habiby's novel is its examination of the behavior of Palestinians within a colonial context. Palestinians are delineated fundamentally as victims and yet ghostly. Early in the novel, they are placed within the Gothic mode as 'wandering

²⁰ Tabish Khair, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (Houndmills Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 6.

²¹ Arjun Appadurai, 'Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,' *Globalization* ed. Arjun Appadurai. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) 7.

apparitions' menacing the Israeli victors after the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War.²² They are tragically and yet ironically presented as roaming deaf, dumb and permanently irresponsive to others, even when they are inquisitively asked about what befell them or 'when warmly greeted' (26). Partly, the figure of the 'Wandering Palestinian' that is created by Habiby is an ironic recycling of the archetypal 'Wandering Jew' as constructed in Christian legend. The text itself questions Saraya's identity and whether she is a female ghoul or a mere jinni. While Palestinians are portrayed as the ghostly demons of Gothic fantasy, the tale of their traumatic reality and suffering is effectively spotlighted to deconstruct and disturb colonial certainties about the validity of the colonial mission. The text presents the life of the Palestinians in Israel as a bitter series of abandonment, estrangement, deportation, and agony. For instance, the narrator sarcastically ridicules how his eighty years old sick aunt was brutally subjected to body search in Ben Gurion International Airport as if she were a terrorist hiding a gasoline or a cluster bomb in her underwear (139-41). Sarcasm is thus employed by Habiby as a means of resistance and survival.

By the same token, Mukherjee's *Jasmine* portrays Hindu women as figures of menace and degeneracy and concomitantly as icons of agency and recreation. Degeneration and victimisation are hence intertwined to frame women according to their discrepant national and ethnic legacies. Images of the Gothic represented in Mukherjee with regard to her view of a power struggle between different sexes, religions and ethnicities. Susan Koshi asserts that Mukherjee's main characters are always marginalised as victims and that 'they are shown as being marked by racial, religious, or class conflicts.'²³ Early in the novel, Jasmine's childhood is made to coincide with the time of unrest in Punjab due to the separatist movement for Khalistan, a separate Sikh state. Jasmine's decision to abandon the traditional, modest *salwar kameez* in favour of the modern, fashionable *sari* is not religiously tolerated and is therefore depicted as a pretext to invite the ire of Sukhwinder, a fanatic friend of her brothers and a Khalistani activist who plans to kill her. According to him, all Hindu women are 'whores' and 'the sari is the sign of the prostitute' (58). He finally plants a bomb at the store where Jasmine is shopping with her husband. The bomb is meant for Jasmine, who becomes a political target because her aspirations pose a threat to the sociopolitical hierarchy based on women's subjection in a caste-bound, genderist society. Violence to women is metaphorically represented through the ghostly visitation of the wolf-sized rabid dog, an animal usually associated with Stoker's *Dracula*, which attacks Jasmine and tries to kill her toward the end of Chapter 8.

Throughout the novel Jasmine is menaced by masculine violence. When Jasmine leaves Hasnapur for the USA, she joins the unsafe, unstable category of 'refugees and mercenaries and guest workers,' passing into 'a shadow world' of endangered bodies (90). In New York Jasmine sees Sukhwinder selling hot dogs in Manhattan's Central Park where she is au-pairing for Duff, Taylor and Wylie's adopted daughter. This happens just as Taylor and Jasmine have been exploring their love for one another, a time of great happiness. However, Jasmine has to flee from

²² The Six-Day War, known in Arabic as *an-Naksah* (The Setback), was fought between June 5 and 10, 1967, by Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.

²³ Susan Koshi, 'The Geography of Female Subjectivity: Ethnicity, Gender, and Diaspora,' *Diaspora* 3.1 (1994) 70.

Taylor to save herself. Even in her life with Bud, she is threatened by death, in the form of the Iowan farmers' suicides and when Harlan Kroener shoots Bud. In the United States, Gothic degeneracy and foreignness are intersected by gender, nationality, ethnicity, and race. As Dracula is perceived in terms of a foreign threat that might corrupt the body politic of the state, coloured women are represented as dangerously foreign bodies that come from the East to degenerate the West and therefore must be naturalised and familiarised: 'In Baden, the farmers are afraid to suggest I'm different. They've seen the aerograms I receive, the strange lettering I can decipher.... They want to make me familiar. In a pinch, they'll admit that I might look a little different, that I'm a 'dark-haired girl' in a naturally blond country. I have a 'darkish complexion' (in India, I'm 'wheatish'), as though I might be Greek from one grandparent. I'm from a generic place, 'over there,' which might be Ireland, France, or Italy' (28-9).

Furthermore, Jasmine is conceived as utterly foreign by her own American husband. Confronted by the repeated pleas from Bud Ripplemeyer, the father of her unborn child, Jasmine reflects upon how much he does not know about her. He has consistently avoided such knowledge, since her 'genuine foreignness frightens him' (22). Instead, his desire and interest are stimulated by his image of 'Eastern' women. She thinks, 'Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability' (178).

Female-empowering alternatives are mediatised through Gothic motifs of the body. *Jasmine* recycles the traditional imperial binarism of the inferior female body indicative of the colonised and the superior masculine body representative of the coloniser. The traditional polarities of the corporeal and the spiritual and death and rebirth are, installed and then destabilised; in Cyndy Hendershot's view 'Gothic bodies disrupt stable notions of what it means to be human. They break down the demarcations between animal and human, death and life, and male and female.'²⁴ *Jasmine*, thus, rewrites the female body as potent and creative and contrastively the male body as weak and vulnerable. After becoming a widow, Jasmine does not hide her body under coarse cloth or shave her head like her mother did. She then plans to commit ritual suicide, *suttee*, like her fellow young woman of Hasnapur who destroys her own life by dousing her body with kerosene after her husband's death to get closer to Yama, the Hindu god of death. Unlike her, Jasmine identifies herself with Kali, the consort of Lord Shiva and the goddess of violent power whose incarnation is a figure and icon of enormous annihilation and recreation. In the United States, the American male sexuality of Half-Face is naturalised through his masculine body that is represented as 'totally naked' and 'monstrously erect' (103) only to be finally subverted and thoroughly destroyed by Jasmine's act of murder and resistance. Like vampires, Half-Face's colonial rape of Jasmine's body is parasitic, feeding off living humans in order to survive. In addition, both Dracula's and Half-Face's uncanny masculine features are more forcefully emphasised during gendered encounters: as Half-Face's body is depicted as monstrously erect before the rape of Jasmine, Dracula's eyes are portrayed as 'positively blazing,' his face as 'deathly pale' and 'hard like drawn wires' and his eyebrows as 'a heaving bar of white-hot metal' during his encounter with female vampires.²⁵ Although Jasmine's feminine, fragile body is

²⁴ Cyndy Hendershot, *The Animal Within: Masculinity and the Gothic* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1998) 9.

²⁵ Bram Stoker. *Dracula* (Mineola: Dover, 1897) 32-33.

threatened by the brutality of American manliness, she chooses to kill Half-Face instead of committing suicide. Thus, she is positively compared to Kali, the slayer of demons, when she slaughters Half-Face, who is associated with 'an underworld of evil' (103). In other words, the identification of Jasmine with Kali, according to Timothy Ruppel, suggests the binary motifs of destruction and renewal:

this restructuring and renewing function of Jasmine as Kali provides a key to the possibility of a postcolonial politics where resistance to the myths, histories, and narratives of the metropolitan center involves an active thematising of the structures of enforced identity, and an affirmative transformation that involves appropriating the weapons and technologies that have served to maintain the center.²⁶

Jasmine's slaughter of Half-Face could be, therefore, identified as a strategy of postcolonial resistance against neocolonialism in Southeast Asia, as Half-Face's name derives from the loss of an eye, an ear, and half his face in Vietnam, where he served as a demolitions expert.

Vampirism, as plotted in this scene of rape and murder, is suggested through Jasmine's bloody tongue protruding from her mouth. Jasmine's slicing of her tongue could nevertheless be considered as counter to vampiric atavism, because her blood is represented as a means to purge her soul of defilement rather than a channel to nourish her body with life. She thinks, 'My body was merely' (108). In contradistinction to the vampiric cult of the corporeal, Jasmine transcends the vampiric emphasis on a corporeal identity and confirms instead that the soul is the site where the truth of desire and identity are to be found.

The Oriental Gothic and Border Existences

Postcolonial writing is naturally diasporic and transnational, thematising border existences and hybrid exchanges. Postcolonial Gothic texts are generally bound up with the transnational in terms of spatio-temporality. Tracing the diasporic rhetoric of Dracula who is himself displaced from the peripheral Transylvania to the metropolitan London among the teeming millions, Habiby's text, for instance, reflects post-war *al-ghurba* (exile or diaspora), a word intensely resonant in the Palestinian lexicon, whereas Mukherjee's work deftly describes the new, late-modern diaspora that 'never broke contact with the homeland as their departure from home coincided with cheap air travel, easy commodification and transfer of cultural capital through technology, initially VHS tapes and DVDs, now through the massive mechanisms of the internet'.²⁷ Thus, most of the characters of the two novels live in a permanent state of relocation and displacement. Though the stories of the two texts are narrated in their entirety from the single perspective of the protagonist-narrators, the range of narrative space is expanded to cover different national, ethnic, and gender trajectories across the diasporic imaginary. In *Saraya* there is a direct reference to the Palestinian diaspora in Arab countries as well as in Sumatra, the U.S., and Argentina. Palestinians are therefore identified metaphorically with Saraya and Noah's wandering dove which

²⁶ Timothy Ruppel, "Re-Inventing Ourselves a Million Times": Narrative, Desire, Identity, and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, *College Literature* 22.1 (1995) 186.

²⁷ Vijay Mishra, 'Memory and Recall from Beyond the Troubled Black Waters,' *South Asian Review* 32.3 (2011) 91.

kept flying to see if the waters subsided and hence never returned back (206). *Jasmine* likewise depicts how displacement does not dilute but reinforces memories of the abandoned locus of origin, complicating the process of redefining home. This diasporic redefinition does not involve radical change, but an inclusion of selves old and new. The scene featuring the arrival of Indian refugees, mercenaries and guest workers to the U.S. pictorially describes how Indian immigrants are set as ‘outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs,’ and yet as never losing sight of the desire for future utopia that can be actualised in finding ‘a job or space to sleep’ (90).

Moreover, diaspora and border existences represent a paradigmatic feature of postcolonialism, transnationalism and vampirism. Gothic epistemology is further associated with fragmented subjectivity typically featured in the border imaginary, comprising convergence and dialogism rather than dialecticism and doubleness among various ethnicities and nationalities. Tracing the genealogy of Gothic writing, Robert Miles defines the Gothic as ‘a discursive site, a carnivalesque for representations of the Diasporic fragmented subject’.²⁸ Both Habiby’s *Saraya* and Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* for instance, expound the motif of border existences which is a basic element of the Dracula tradition. As Dracula’s liminal locus is situated between the dead and the living, the postcolonial text is placed on the borderlines between the oral and the written and the fictional and the metafictional. Stoker’s *Dracula*, comparatively, foregrounds the instability of the written document by first inscribing it as ‘simple fact’²⁹ at the outset and then subverting its mimetic engagement with the world at the very end. As Jonathan Harker, one of the main characters of the novel, mentions in the concluding ‘Note’ to *Dracula*: ‘We were struck with the fact, that in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of typewriting, except the later note-books of Mina and Seward and myself, and Van Helsing’s memorandum.’³⁰

The two texts hence highlight the complex interactions between written and oral cultural forms. Postcolonial writing recuperates the agency of the foreign other through deploying the oral and the metafictional in the Gothic genre to write back to the colonial and modernist canonisation of literacy and written culture. Both the Gothic and the oral are similar, as both have been excluded from the written scripts of the dominant. The rewriting of the Oriental vampire topos has obvious resonance with what is termed as ‘postcolonial metafiction’ with view to their common strategy of retrieving the ineffable legacy of the oral culture and language of the colonised and the marginalised. According to Ahmed Gamal, ‘Postcolonial metafiction can thus be defined as that self-conscious fiction that has a dual agenda of contesting and deconstructing colonial textuality and stereotypes and simultaneously recuperating and reconstructing native agency and language’.³¹ Thus, both postcolonial and Gothic writings are fundamentally intertextual, rewriting and revising predecessors according to new emergent discourses.

²⁸ Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 4.

²⁹ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2000), vi.

³⁰ Stoker 326.

³¹ Ahmed Gamal ‘Rewriting Strategies in Tariq Ali’s Postcolonial Metafiction’ *South Asian Review* 31.2 (2010) 32.

In postcolonial writing, language is the site of negotiation and opposition. Arabic in Habiby's *Saraya* and Hindi in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* are retrieved as symptoms that emerge in the text in correspondence to the Gothic return of the repressed ghostly to the vacant body of narrative memory. The oral and vernacular forms of Arabic and Hindi therefore dominate the narrative voice and structure of the two texts and simultaneously intersect with intertextual references to both Eastern and Western literary, religious, philosophical, and political canonical scripts. Despite the conspicuous differences between the two texts in terms of content and the nationalities of the protagonist-narrators, both of them evolve along similar trajectories of old memories that are retrieved in the form of oral tales and written scripts. *Saraya* is defined by the author according to Arabic folk legacy as *khurafiyya* (fairy tale) based on a Palestinian legend about Saraya, the girl captured by the ghoul. In structural terms, the whole narrative consists of mental associations and imaginative leaps that lack the structure of an ordered, scripted plot. What motivates Habiby's alter-ego novelist to write/relate his novel/tale is the fictive universe haunted by the macabre Canterville Ghost in Wilde or the cries of *Wuthering Heights* in Brontë and the jinns or the supernatural creatures in Arab folklore as well as the mysterious female figure he catches a glimpse of over the sea. 'The episode,' the narrator asserts, 'was a kind of key, like the ancient Egyptian key of life ... or a magic mattock, like Aladdin's lamp, which I took up as I began to excavate the mountains of oblivion, trying, as best I could, to penetrate the caverns of memory' (25-6). The act of reading is subsequently presented as an imaginary voyage to discover who or what this apparition called Saraya was. The complex interplay of dream and reality, fiction and fact, orality and literacy, draw on an invented autonomous cosmos of metafictional sources and meditations (by turns serious and ironic) as disparate as Gorky, al-Mutanabbi, Plato, Hemingway, and Lenin. Furthermore, the reader constructs the true identity and reality of Saraya in his imagination, feeling free to give shape to fictive referents. 'Fictive referents are more real to the imagination than are real ones. Stories are only stories – and therein lie their enormous power and value'.³² In the different tales narrated, Saraya accordingly takes on a fluid host of roles, sometimes shifting in the course of a single page from the flesh-and-blood beloved of the hero's childhood to a whispery symbol of the wadis and ridges around Mount Carmel to a kind of laughing muse.

Analogously, Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is constructed from the very beginning as a folk tale distanced 'Lifetimes ago' from Western modernity (1). However, all throughout the novel, Jasmine identifies herself with both Eastern oral traditions of Hindu mythical beings on the one hand and Western literary characters and popular culture figures on the other. Jasmine is portrayed as a potent goddess, as having the third eye, as Kali, as a tornado, and concurrently as a lady James Bond who romances with the men that come in her life while never forgetting her mission to survive and become a city woman as Eliza Doolittle who is instructed in gentility by Professor Higgins in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. The Indian Jyoti is thus transformed into the American Jasmine due to the help of her husband Prakash. 'Jyoti, Jasmine:' the heroine wonders, 'I shuttled between identities' (70). Both Hindu myth and the Gothic canon are founded on the belief in alternate and multiple realities. Mukherjee meditates on

³² Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1980) 79.

such belief: 'As a Hindu, I was brought up on oral tradition and epic literature in which animals can talk, birds can debate ethical questions, and monsters can change shapes. I believe in the existence of alternate realities, and this belief makes itself evident in my fiction.'³³ This fact ultimately helps Mukherjee in endorsing the tremendous potential of the marginalised immigrant and describing a threshold area in which cultural transformation may occur. Mukherjee's belief in 'alternate realities' is therefore in accord with the postcolonial experience of borderlands.

Conclusion

Both Habiby and Mukherjee use the Gothic to explore and rewrite the hidden histories and transcripts of the repression and abuse of Palestinians and Indians in transnational contexts. They achieve this through establishing a particular strand of postcolonial Gothic writing, one which looks back to older stock representations of vampirism and one which looks forward to a return to the potential of cultural exchange and border existences. Gender is foregrounded in the narrative texture to demonstrate how the two writers' vision of colonialism and primitivism is ghosted by masculinity and patriarchy. Habiby and Mukherjee both recycle and update the images of the ghoul and the vampire in order to suggest that they, like Saraya and Jasmine, represent the dilemma of a postcolonial self trapped by the past but struggling to create new liminality and hybridity in the present. The two texts provide additional evidence with respect to the potential of both South Asian and Middle Eastern writers to draw upon, return to, and build on a canon of folk tales and myths from the subcontinent, Middle East and the West. Thus, both of Habiby's and Mukherjee's works provide a crisscrossing of cultures, literatures and linguistic traditions to articulate their authors' transnational experience which forged their career as writers.

³³ Alison B. Carb and Bharati Mukherjee, 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee', *The Massachusetts Review* 29.4 (1988/1989) 651.