

Once There Was Cosmopolitanism: Enchanted Pasts as Global History in the Contemporary Novel

Bishnupriya Ghosh

There were no histories of Palestine. I mean I had to reconstruct the history, partly. Well, I had to deconstruct the official history that one saw in the western press and western scholarship and then somehow try to advance a notion of what our history was, and I did it largely through the optic of what Zionism did to us. That is to say we were the effect of Zionism, which is not a correct way of doing it, but that was all that was available to me at the time. And I think it was at that time I became much more convinced that the study of literature, for example, was a historical enterprise, not just an aesthetic one.

Edward Said to Tariq Ali, in *Conversations*, 97–8¹

Scene One

Smoke whirls rise mingling with the exhausted breath of armies at battle's close. The valorous Balian of Ibelin has just ceded Jerusalem (October 1187) to the mighty emperor, the righteous Sultan Yusuf Salah al-Din Ayyub (commonly known as Saladin), at a famous close of the third crusade that wrought an uneasy peace (the Treaty of Ramala) between bitter enemies. As the stately Salah al-Din strides into the abandoned city; as the marble crescent is hoisted above the walls to signal the return of the Muslims to their Holy Land; as the historically-reputed tolerant and cosmopolitan victor purposively picks up a fallen gold cross, his feet (shot in closeup) marking territory, but with respect for all; as the orchestral score rises to underline a new day; and as his minions follow scattering rose petals, bright reds against the grayish blue pall of battle, Ridley Scott's controversial *Kingdom of Heaven* draws to its close. The bell tolls; Salah

al-Din (played by the intensely regal Ghassan Massaud) kneels to pray. By this time, we are exhausted by Balian's exertions but relieved peace has come to the Holy Land for we live in times when news from those parts only comes in the form of bombs, missiles, artilleries, embargoes, walls, permits, unsettlement, and stones. Lost in the historical spectacular, we are willing to be transported to that fragile moment—lasting momentarily, but now enshrined in beautifully crafted audiovision.

But *only* momentarily—for Salah al-Din's victory, obscuring the humanist victory of Balian, would take precedence for audiences who responded to the film with mixed feelings. The reasons for this are too many to elaborate; but the signs of a mixed reception were quite clear. Known for his fast-paced action films, the venture was a labor of love for Scott, as he discloses in the director's cut (complete with special features on authorities who vouch for the film's historical accuracy²), a secular humanist take on the ongoing war between Christendom and the Islamic empire. But such visionary history was precisely the problem. For one, it was not commercially viable: Twentieth Century Fox insisted on a final product minus 45 minutes of the original director's cut, in order to market an action-adventure flick and not a historical epic. Still the film flopped in box offices, garnering \$47 million in the United States, well below its 130-million production budget; in Europe and worldwide (including Egypt), however, it grossed over \$211 million. For another, its subject provoked a knee-jerk hatred toward Salah al-Din (historically, widely respected by his opponents, such as Richard the Lionheart), fueling the reading of the end as a "tragic" defeat of the historical (read Christian) West. If this was history, some refused its enticements; if Scott depended on the sheer power of cinematic thrills and sensations to present an alternate possible world, few seemed willing to lose themselves in the historical memory. The epic would reopen a wound; the story would not close over the hurt of recent history.

Scene Two

A melodious strain ("*manmohana*, *manmohana*" or "the charmer of my heart") wafts into the splendour of the imperial *darbar* (a court in session) in Emperor Akbar's sixteenth-century fabled city, Fatepur

Sikri, tearing the lovelorn king away from his courtly deliberations. As the Rajput princess (played by the glamorous Aishwarya Rai) sings to the prince of her heart, the Lord Krishna, within the sanctuary of the temple (built *inside* the Muslim fort) that she negotiated with her imperial husband in exchange for her trust, Akbar (played by the lithe smoky Hrithik Roshan) strides toward the source of the luscious A. R. Rahman-composed *bhajan*—once more enamored of the recalcitrant princess whose heart (and body) he still has not won. Thin gauze colored curtains dreamily brush his face and body as the emperor walks slowly through long takes, for several minutes, from court to courtyard to palace entrance to hall to temple. The motion is light, slow, graceful; the architectural space intricate, weaving around us; the vibrations of intense devotional music fall deliriously heavy upon the ear³; soft textures highlight a virile muscularity resplendent in kingly costume. A scene made for love, inspiring desire in the spectator by now disinterested in the historical accuracy of the unfolding love story—caught in that willing suspension of disbelief that romances us now and then.

A lush historical epic, Ashutosh Gowariker's *Jodha Akbar* (2008)⁴ pays homage to a popularly remembered love story of the unforgettable passion of Jalaluddin Mohammed Akbar, the Mughal Emperor widely loved as the bringer of peace between his Hindu and Muslim subjects in the newly conquered land (Hindustan) he strove to make his home, and the (fictive) Jodha Bai,⁵ his greatest, and avowedly Hindu love of stellar aristocratic heritage (hailing from valiant Rajput stock, warriors known for their resistance to Muslim conquerors of India). One need hardly belabour why such a legend would persist in a nation rife with ever resurgent Hindu-Muslim tensions; why the cosmopolitan humanist Akbar, known for his patronage of all arts irrespective of religious sanctity, would continue to captivate; why a director, in collaboration with Bollywood's most exciting production company (UTV, headed by Ronnie Screwala) would seek to bridge communal bitterness, even as historians protested historical inaccuracies (especially, the fictitious nature of Jodha Bai and the elision of Akbar's historical syncretic religion, the *Din-e-Ilahi*); and why such a secular humanist endeavour would spur protests and bans in the Hindu right-dominated states of

Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Uttarkhand, and Rajasthan. First off to a slow start (24 crore rupees or \$533,333) in the opening weekend, box office profits rose to 50 crores (\$1.1 million) by the fourth weekend; across the seas, in North America alone the spectacle would gross \$1.3 million in its opening weekend. Remade history would come to stay, enchant by story, set design, costume, music, choreography, and the sumptuous sway of star bodies.

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In this half-discovered world everyday brought news of fresh enchantments. The visionary revelatory dream-poetry of the quotidian had not yet been crushed by blinkered prosy facts.

Salman Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*, 12

It is not that we have not seen these historical episodes cinematically recounted before. But the memorable productions—for instance, K. Asif's Hindi-language *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960),⁶ a beloved period piece for Bombay film audiences, or Youssef Chahine's homage, *The Victorious Saladin* (1963),⁷ equally popular in Egypt—were largely national treasures, both made in less war-like times (before the 1967 six-day war in Palestine, before the post-partition eruption of Hindu-Muslim violence in the 1990s). Neither had the global distribution of *Jodha Akbar* or *Kingdom of Heaven*; neither the urgent call to history as enchantment. Their scale of distribution, high production values (signaling financing for world, and not domestic, markets), and historical temper would propel both films beyond quotidian commercial mass entertainment; muddying customary low expectations, they would come to be judged for their world-making politics, their willed interventions into rising religious tensions, despite their obvious incitements to dream. I begin with them not only because they *share* the project of historical cosmopolitanism with their print media counterparts, historical novels, but also because beginning elsewhere—in the powerfully immersive media that is cinema—only highlights the specific cultural work of literature, especially high literary works that are reflexive about their knowledge production and therefore have fairly limited readerships. I will return intermittently to the scenes above, but here, as we turn to literature, they

give me necessary critical tread to pose a few key questions. If ours is a historical epoch when cultural practitioners (artists, filmmakers, novelists, poets, musicians, videogame designers, among them) across faiths have been mining historical pasts for evidence of a secular humanism that could remake our world of military and religious expansionism, how do they enchant us variously in different media practices? What is the nature of world making in contemporary historical novels in this regard? How might we characterize the cosmopolitan pasts we find there?

These questions circle the specific kind of cultural practice in contemporary novels that is *historical cosmopolitanism*: a recuperation, and inevitable reinvention, of discontinuous “pasts,” usually told from localized perspectives but threaded into the greater story of a *global* history. At the heart of such a history of modern nations, regional or dispersed cultures, and civilizations, is exchange—a trade of goods, information, and people—that has increased global connectivity so exponentially in our time that we rummage for critical templates expressive of the consequent “sense of mutuality” (Breckenridge 578). Cosmopolitanism, a hotly debated and often-disliked term, has become a placeholder for this sense of mutuality, as we become more and more self-reflexive about our inevitable global connectivity. In fact, one might say the reflexivity regarding global connections, made possible because of the massive transformations in communications infrastructures (including the global distribution/exhibition of the two films with which I began), is the signature of *our* phase of globalization. We project inhabiting a world more than any other epoch, for the world materializes in the mass media everyday in living rooms, handheld devices, shops, public squares and private spaces, all saturated with screen cultures. Such connectivity more often than not mandates a sense of mutuality and, subsequently, its opposing force—that is, a chauvinism which sends us scuttling into protected corners. As global connections intensify, newly provincializing imperatives, personal (e.g. radical individualism) and geopolitical (e.g. ethnocentrism), mushroom, energized by the unrelenting fear of the other. Amid the conflict at the heart of exchange, even as we continue to fight over land, energy, goods, information, and people, one articulation of provincialism endures: religious expansionism, a world-making

project recursively aggrandizing new territories in the name of the gods. The crusades and *jihad* return—often, chillingly, in remembered guises, nursing (projected) “ancient” grudges.

Such continuities, in turn, send us back to the past to ask: what resources did *they*, our counterparts in the foreign country that is the past, have against religious orthodoxies, ethnic cleansing, or military expansionism? Cosmopolitanism (rearticulated with axiomatic modernity, secularism, and humanism) arrives as a privileged stop in a genealogical quest, an old idea constantly poured in new bottles. When we look at its many guises, we recognize we have never been fully cosmopolitan; chauvinism has always scuttled living with difference. Always a *becoming* in the world, never finished, cosmopolitanism glimmers ever so briefly, in enchanted pasts—always suffused with reason, and yet alluring in their aesthetics. Cultural practitioners lure us there, immersing us in truncated episodes deftly woven into a “global history.” Once historical, we enter these discontinuous, disconnected, but often parallel, portals; as post-enlightenment subjects we begin to *objectify* the sense of mutuality they evoke in us, “seeing” connections once lived only as a structure of feeling—at best, a living with alterity; at worst, a fear of the other.

If the stakes for finding a capacious self-reflexive articulation of a sense of mutuality are so high—they can explode in airports, burn holes in lungs of migrant workers, starve the children of the other—then we also comprehend why the genealogical baggage of a particular term, cosmopolitanism, can be the subject of vociferous debate. At its broadest, cosmopolitanism is a set of practices that configure our sense of mutuality in the face of coming (or continuing) conflict. It would be impossible, indeed unnecessary, to rehearse the debate over cosmopolitanism extensively, partly because I have rehearsed it elsewhere;⁸ so I will be somewhat telegraphic here. At worst, cosmopolitanism captures a sociality born of privilege and nurtured in the disaffected ennui, the political inertia, of elite bourgeois subjects: they “belong” to the world because they move freely within it; their relationship to strangers only serves to celebrate a rich bourgeois interiority. At best, the same relation between strangers—uneven, complicated, and possibly transformative—has the potential for rethinking sociality and, consequently, an alternative glo-

bality (the image of the place where we now live) beyond the shadows of financial, industrial, and military empires. In both respects, one only has to travel these days to have the dream of mutuality evaporate at ports; after all, the consequences are starkly different from those who die crossing borders to those just annoyed at body searches at airports when security personnel touch their “junk.”⁹

But the fact cosmopolitanism *is* a dream continues to variously irk contemporary critics of global capital.¹⁰ In its current phase of flexible accumulation, capital turns the philosophically thick optic that is cosmopolitanism into its handmaiden: the outcome is a much-celebrated, consumer cosmopolitanism. A globalizing managerial drive, consumer cosmopolitanism fragments and projects the world as market where we are sold neat packages, each placed in *equivalence* to the other; as new economic blocs (such as India and China) arrive on the world stage, a cosmopolitanism that accentuates their difference only to epistemologically equalize them as ancient (competing and parallel) civilizations can become the means for forging consensus on how to survive this fast-paced, changing, economic transformation. Cosmopolitan, configuring mutuality, *returns*, its potentiality more keenly advanced as argument when we are in the midst of massive socioeconomic and/or political transformations. A willed forgetting of irreconcilable difference, often connected to traumatic events in the past, accompanies this flattening of the field of exchange; such revisionism further projects the participants in the unfolding of the drama of cosmopolitanism as *once* pure, unmixed, or separate entities. Given this “once upon a time” temporality, cosmopolitanism has always been historical in temper, even when celebrating the multicultural new. History in the form of narration establishes a pure difference in the past that can be put to rest now with equanimity; we can consume difference without the hurt of history. Muslim emperors fall in love with fictive Hindu princesses who are portrayed as their *equal*; great humanists (Balian and Salah al-Din) understand each other’s deepest desire—peace—over the coveted prize of the Holy Land.

Historical cosmopolitanism can therefore willfully reinforce the separation, the core project of modernity as the editors of the *Public Culture* millennial volume on cosmopolitanism remind us,¹¹ between entities

that begin to appear flat, localized, and accessed as manageable difference. Cosmopolitanism becomes the conciliatory practice of mixing, the sense of mutuality necessary for generating consensus on shared interests in the present; it is at once future-oriented, a praxis to be perfected, still to come, as it is revisionist in simplifying complex histories between these adjacent and interactive cultures. This is a rather different localizing imperative, however, from other varieties broadly categorized as “critical cosmopolitanisms,” all antithetical to the instrumentality of the managerial cosmopolitanism described so far. If the major critique of cosmopolitanism has come from the left, often highlighting internationalism as the still-not-forgotten geopolitical mutuality of interests, then some scholars have taken up the challenge in proposing a series of critical cosmopolitanisms that eschew the global in the interests of a situated, avowedly localized politics—a “cosmopolitics” in one famous revision, “vernacular” or “lived” cosmopolitanisms in others, always attentive to differences that cannot be erased, forgotten, flattened, or managed even as one commits to living with them. One could get lost in nuances here, so let me remain with the question of history with which we are concerned. In critically informed historical cosmopolitanism, history does not rest easily as cultural practitioners elaborate intensely networked historical relations that were *always mixed*, always entangled—and often in painful and inextricable ways. Such historical cosmopolitanisms muddy the projected “pure” separation, revealing the entities to have always been in each other’s business and often with irreconcilable differences. Such a critical perspective on networked relations advances a “planetary conviviality,” as Walter D. Mignolo terms it, that ensures living with difference such as heavy histories, continuing disputes, or unassimilated tastes. Always future-oriented, a constant becoming, this historical cosmopolitanism, too, posits the tactical management of difference either as constant adaptation (giving rise to vernacular cosmopolitanisms) or as the reopening/touching of a historical wound (undigested trauma as the source of difference). Both forms of historical cosmopolitanism question the historical desire to conjugate entities within the overarching *telos* of a coming reconciliation. Both narrate “pasts,” discontinuous with each other, sometimes missing, and

sometimes available in contradictory accounts; hence these historical cosmopolitanisms inevitably take on epistemology as their real concern.

If cosmopolitanism hovers shakily upon the horizon of expectations, in the cultural practices of critical cosmopolitanism we are invited to inhabit it precisely as a structure of feeling.¹² The best storytellers enchant us in their overtly affective and sensory works. One could find evidence of historical cosmopolitanism in a range of historical texts, but here I look at those that cannot be understood in any other way. That is, these cultural texts, specifically historical novels often characterized as modern epics, *perform* cosmopolitanism in their self-reflexive turning of archive into expressive repertoire (a project suggested in the Edward Said comment prefacing this essay). Different, difficult to recuperate, missing in institutional archives, and discontinuous with any history of progress, the cosmopolitan pasts we find there lure us into luscious time-space capsules that bring news of a sense of mutuality that *once was*—sometimes embodied by great figures such as the educated, tolerant Salah al-Din or the benevolent Akbar, but often by the small or the subaltern, those overlooked footnotes in the world historical record. Several contemporary novelists have been long engaged in the creation of such repertoires, many quite explicit in their search for the entanglements, crossings, and seepage accompanying global exchanges.

That the novel has borne the burden of history rather heavily in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries —often telling “in another place, another time”¹³ those pasts that cannot be told or that were willfully buried—is a commonplace. The novels with which we are concerned, all novels in English driven by present concerns to reframe global history, take on another kind of burden: the dual task of simultaneously *projecting* (far in the distant past) and *simulating* (immersing us in it for a while) an alternate globality, an image of an inter-connected world that was once governed by the sense of mutuality we stand to lose at great cost. For many postcolonial writers for whom “world making” has always been *the* project, the contemporary Middle East as the locus of conflict has been a central preoccupation; if humanist enterprises, old and new, have materialized the human in multiple guises, inevitably bounded by its other, a secular humanism that once promised a sense of

religious mutuality seems up for grabs again—celebrated, vilified, interrogated, or negotiated. If Middle East has come to stay in our imaginations, these novelists seem to ask, how might we understand the cultural field of differences that accompany it in our everyday lives?

The two novels I will focus on are both written by British writers of South Asian origin better known as public intellectuals who seek to provoke us: Tariq Ali's *The Book of Saladin* (1998), a central tale (and second volume) in his recently completed Islamic quintet, and Salman Rushdie's *Enchantress of Florence*, another historical fiction that returns to Christendom and Islam as had the infamous *Satanic Verses*, but perhaps less directly. Rushdie and Ali's respective political stature (quite apart from how one values their *oeuvre*) credentials the historical enterprise of the two novels¹⁴ we shall pursue at greater length shortly. Now the plotting of the essay might become clearer to the reader. The films, *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Jodha Akbar*, immerse us in the very same memorable pasts made history in the two novels, set in the twelfth and sixteenth centuries respectively; together they vertiginously traverse the geographies of South Asia, the Middle East, and continental Europe, and touch the shores of Europe's fifteenth century new world. The backcloth of the films more finely clarifies the very different expressivity of print media, especially novelistic immersion and critique, even as their collusion with novels on popular world making highlights *which* pasts have become more urgent to re-tell in our times. As politicized literary practice, these novels has continued Edward Said's postcolonial project, with Palestine (the singular and paradigmatic postcolony) an ever freshly opened wound; in this they join a host of other historical endeavors where we find the cosmopolitan pasts of the Middle East, such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *The Ship* (1979) or Naguib Mahfouz' *The Harafish* (1977). In reflecting on these media, this essay, too, responds to the historical urgency of re-telling global history.

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The geographical sense makes projections—imaginative, cartographic, military, economic, historical, or in the general sense cultural. It also makes possible the construction of various

kinds of knowledge, all of which are in one way or another dependent on the perceived character or destiny of a particular geography.

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 93

Tariq Ali and Salman Rushdie need little introduction to readers of the “postcolonial” or “world” literatures of the contemporary period. So I will restrict myself to two short caveats that frame the will to history behind the two historical enterprises. Best known for his editorial work at the *New Left Review* and for the Channel Four programs his television company, Bandung, produced, Tariq Ali¹⁵ notes he was inspired to a greater global history by Edward Said, who, after reading the first of the Islamic quintet, *The Shadow of the Pomegranate Tree*, exclaimed: “You’ve got to tell the whole bloody story now. You just can’t stop midway” (qtd. in Campbell). Ali would take the insistence to heart, he maintains, realizing the political stakes of the “pasts” he could assemble *as* history in a work of fiction—pasts that could captivate, and therefore, could be revived in popular memory. For Rushdie, the historical stakes for *The Enchantress of Florence*, one of few novels where he returns, if only obliquely, to religious history (and to the Mughal Empire, so briefly referenced in *The Satanic Verses*),¹⁶ are prodigious: the novel, he explained in a conversation preceding a reading of his new work,¹⁷ was a labour of love, twelve years’ worth of reading the fifteenth-century *Baburnama* (also known as the *Tuzk-e-Babri*, the founder of the Mughal empire, Zahir ud-Din Mohammed Babur’s memoirs) followed by methodical research into the parallel world of sixteenth-century Florence ruled by the infamous Medicis. It was not a flight of fancy, he insisted, like *Jodha Akbar*, released right before the novel hit the stands. These disclosures tell us, faithful to their ongoing critique of military, economic, and political world-making, history becomes the all-consuming love for both men as they embark on these novels.

Yet they are not period pieces, but devoutly *geopolitical* stories of empires that rise, stabilize, and fall as the powerful (Akbar and Elizabeth Tudor, Salah al-Din and the Knights Templar) eye each other across continents. If, as Said once suggested in *Culture and Imperialism*,

“geographical notation” makes territorial takeovers possible and foretells the manifest destiny of lands, then these novels map quests, campaigns, escapes, and adventures to etch an alternate “globality”—the contingent spatial image of the world we inhabit. The cosmopolitan play of difference is exteriorized as a cultural geography sutured by the two travelers, both fictive storytellers, who reflexively fascinate us (and implied listeners in the novelistic worlds) with their fables. At the center of *Enchantress* is chameleon yellow-haired traveler, wearing difference in his parti-colored coat made of leather lozenges, supposedly the grandson of Emperor Babur’s sister, Qara Kōz (Lady with the Black Eyes)—written out of the historical record because she had deserted her brother for his enemy. Born in the new world, the illegitimate child of incest, he is the true cosmopolitan, a trickster (posing as an “English ambassador” bringing Elizabeth Tudor’s letter to Akbar¹⁸) who makes his way through Florence to Fatepur Sikri; moving over Central Asia, between bustling cities vibrant in crime, political intrigue, and sex, Niccoló Vespucci (alias Ucelli di Firenze or Mogor dell’ Amore/the Mughal of Love) assembles parallel worlds in his travels, a figure for living in mutuality. Similarly, in *Saladin*, Ali invents a Jewish scribe, Ibn Yakub, who, to tell the “true” history of the great Emperor, must travel with him from Cairo, to Damascus, to Jerusalem. (The greater quintet is more ambitious in gathering Granada, Damascus, Paris, Sicily, Lahore, and Istanbul within its cultural geography, re-worlding through Islam’s vicissitudes the world annotated by European conquest). Ibn Yakub, too, falls in the shadow of the great physician-philosopher Ibn Maymun (better known as Maimonides, Ali notes, carefully transcribing the Islamic version of the name) and his rival, the Sultan’s advisor and court historian, Kadi al-Fadi. The precarious status of the characters as historians, together with the *illegitimacy* of historical reference, grants them poetic license—to vivify history without “blinkerered prosy fact” (Rushdie 12). Both witness the personal transformation of emperors, effectively providing first-hand, affective and *interested* accounts of world history.

In short, they can enchant without reservation, relating worlds they have passed with a sensuousness that concretizes the past and immerses

us in it. Often richly nuanced descriptive passages flamboyantly stage cosmopolitanism as cultural opulence fit for kings. At these moments, cultural cosmopolitanism is the expression of political and economic power. This is particularly true of the countless descriptive passages, often stilling narrative action, often highly expressive (in the manner we expect of Rushdie), in both novels as they eulogize the great cultural meccas of Florence and Fatepur Sikri, Cairo and Damascus. For example, after the games in Palazzo Medici, Florence, we find

... *zuppa pavese* to drink, and peacocks to eat, and pheasants from Chiavenna. And Tuscan partridges, and oysters from Venice. There was pasta made the Arab way with much sugar and cinnamon, while all the dishes involving the flesh of swine, such as *fagioli* with pork skins, were avoided out of consideration for the sensibilities of the guest of honour. (Ali 366)

Cosmopolitan pasts illuminate cultural thoroughfares on such occasions, spreading feasts before our eyes in the vein of consumer cosmopolitanism with its flattening of differences. Yet the always self-reflexive memory work of the novels, locating us in time-space capsules of deliciously strange places where strangers meet, underscores the fragility of these pasts flashing upon us as chimerical moments that are largely forgotten. For why else would they need *fiction* to revivify them as a sensuously lived cosmopolitanism? As Ibn Yakub reflects on his historical models (Ibn Maymun, Ibrahim ibn Suleiman of Damascus, and the great Tabiri) in his conversations with the Sultan, he insists upon historical “truth” as a hypothesis gleaned from multiple narrators; and as Mogor dell’ Amore captivates the Mughal court with his tall tales, even as he keeps the secret of his birth (the fact Qara Kōz was barren, and his mother was her servant’s child), their doubts infect the time-capsules they narrate with complex affect. We know the worlds they narrate are not *true*, but that they are popular embodied memories struggling to enter the cognitive field of historical reason.

In these subjective takes, the enchantment we ascribe to the scared endures, despite their privileging of secular reason in both novels: Rushdie portrays an educated, secular Akbar for whom the aesthetic sublime

has replaced the sacred, while Ali directly interrogates the repressive orthodoxy that scuttles the luminous, enduring love affair between two begums in (the equally tolerant) Salah al-Din's harem. We are seduced into history as it were, in complex sequences that yoke our *senses*: as Salah al-Din describes his early love, Zubayda, light and texture—"a soft moon-entangled cloud"—combines with color, "...a silk robe, the colour of the sky.... richly patterned with a variety of birds," even as these senses are overwritten by the ear: "All this one forgot when she played the lute and her voice accompanied the music" (282). Drawn into the body, as we *move* into the foreign we encounter difference as a structure of feeling rather than an abstract cognitive field of perceptions. As Ucello do Firenze contemplates the legendary Fatepur Sikri, freezing narrative action (and therefore time, much like his grandmother, the enchantress of Florence), his still habitation of the moment turns Sikri into embodied memory, into frissons of remembered sensations:

As the light faded the city seemed to grow. Dense neighborhoods huddled outside the walls, muezzins called from their minarets, and in the distance he could see the lights of large estates. Fires began to burn in the twilight, like warnings. From the black bowl of the sky came the answering fires of the stars.
(10)

We *feel* the city's voluminous amorphous shape; we *see* its lights; we *feel* the overturned depth of the sky. Here we shuttle between the haptic and the visual, while elsewhere one sense turns into another: earlier in the day, Ucello sees/hears/feels "shrieking parrots [that] exploded like green fireworks in the sky" (8). Media theorists describe such sensory shuttling, the crossing and overlapping of the senses as synaesthesia,¹⁹ an immersive experience that habituates the viewer/player into the media world (usually of cinema or the videogame). Certainly the sensuous immersion in novels is rather different from the immediacy of synaesthesia in audiovisual and digital technologies; in print we are at one remove from the senses, moving toward them through the linguistic sign. The indirection defers that "cosmopolitan feeling" as something toward which we reach—a becoming, rather than a complete experience. In

turn the incompleteness marks our discontinuity from a cosmopolitan vibrant once upon a time.

With such extreme localization, the writers of historical cosmopolitanism overcome the vast stretches of the cultural geography of the novels. We know “when” and “where” was cosmopolitanism. But our enchantments never eschew the critical imperatives behind their romance with world history; hence these are works of “critical enchantment,” the term Bhaskar Sarkar transcribes for the sensuous memory work of the partition in Indian cinema.²⁰ The will to a *different* version of the historical past clearly marks the advent of narration in both works. As *Saladin* commences, Ali underscores the importance of imagined pasts as correction to the ideological distortions that constitute the great chronicles of Islam and Christianity:

Should actual historical evidence be disregarded in the interests of a good story? I think not. In fact the more one explores the imagined inner life of the characters, the more important it becomes to remain loyal to historical facts and events, even in the case of the Crusades, where Christian and Muslim chroniclers often provide different interpretations of what actually happened. (xiv)

Ibn Yakub, who explores different models of history, biography, and chronicle, decides to gather evidence of Salah al-Din’s life from multiple narrators; the novel unfolds as a series of embedded accounts, chronologically arraigned, that *unravel* the commonly-held contemporary perception of Jews and Muslims as eternally opposed forces caught in never-ending wars over al-Kuds (the Muslim name for Jerusalem). “Never absent from our world of make believe” (33), the Holy Land, Ibn Yakub insists, has always invited revisionary histories tailored to redefine its territorial destiny. In the twelfth century, for instance, the rapacious Franj (the French) “wished to wipe out the past and rewrite the future of al-Kuds” (33), inflicting damage on the “People of the Book,” the Jews and Muslims who share a destiny in the Holy Land. No wonder the great Salah-al Din would invite a *Jewish* scribe to pen his story, a more personal biography than the many official court versions of the

emperor's life. And for Ibn Yakub, dreaming of al-Kuds since he was a boy, contradictory personal investments would muddy the objectivity of his critical revisionism: he would feel jealousy toward his subject of narration, Salah al-Din, on the appearance of the exquisite Halima, as both emperor and scribe became equals in their desire for her; he would stray from his chronologies to relate Halima and Jamila's passion (in an effort to rectify, as Ali remarks in his preface, the silence on women's history in official records), his sexual fascination and growing intellectual respect for Jamila overcoming his duty to emperor; he would experience anger against his fellow Jewish historian, Ibn Maymun, when he finds him in bed with his wife, Rachel; he would be rent by guilt at his survival of the French raid upon his house in Cairo, leading to the destruction of his entire family. After all, he had been living his boyhood dream of re-taking Jerusalem for the People of the Book, riding confidently at Salah al-Din's side, while his loved ones perished. The accidental, surfacing as untimely trauma, would silence the scribe for years. But with narration, the present of the book, would come the healing rush of memory:

These are painful memories. I keep them submerged. Yet today, as I begin to write this story, the image of that doomed room where everything once began is strong in me again. The caves of our memory are extraordinary. Things that are long forgotten remain hidden in dark corners, suddenly to emerge into the light. I can see everything now. It comes to my mind clearly, as if time itself had stopped still. (3)

Now for any scholar familiar with historical meta-fiction, this self-reflexive affective history, bracketed by personal trauma, would comprise a common postmodern literary practice.²¹ One is compelled to read it as a performance of historical cosmopolitanism, however, because of the novel's rigorous revision of a particular *configuration* of contemporary differences—the present face-off between Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultures—as a global history of mutuality (of interests, of projects, of loves). Difference simmers in the belly of bitter enemies, both within and without. Certainly the Christians (represented by “the Franj”) are *not* unified, as the story of Bertrand Toulouse the Perfecti's infiltration

of the belligerent Knight Templars and his subsequent defection to the Salah al-Din's camp reveals. But nor are the Muslims: they are internally divided over the uncertainty over the status of the *hadith*, the news of the orthodox repression of Abul Hassan al-Bakri's life of the prophet (*Sirat al-Bakri*),²² and Halima's shocking conversion to hereternormativity show and tell. The peacemaker Salah al-Din acknowledges these complications, "they are as divided as we" (200), he notes, and therefore remains opposed to *jihad* as *permanent* war. Internal differences, unresolved traumas, accidents and ruptures disrupt the smooth play of differences, destabilizing any easy consumption of pleasurable cosmopolitan pasts. Historical meta-fiction is no axiomatic postmodern enterprise here, but a painful reminder that *remembering* those richly lived cosmopolitan pasts is no simple task. They are at best unstable correctives for the present juncture; pasts always on the edge of disappearance, they fall around us as the historical narration that carries them falters.

The Enchantress overtly sutures less painful pasts through the antics of the (ostensibly) lost scion of the Mughal house, a sturdy survivor who turns tricks with his secret. The mystery of his "origin," not revealed until the bitter end, drives the self-professedly self-centered narration as Ucello/Niccoló/Mogor searches for the one true ear for his story: "Himself a teller of tales, he had been driven out of his door by stories of wonder, and one particular story that would make his fortune or else cost his life" (12). Like other historical meta-fiction Rushdie has sketched, here, too, our path to the origin is derailed; we wander lost in multiple embedded tales until we, too, fall under the sensuous spell of the parallel and mirrored worlds of Florence and Sikri. Held in the thrall of great empires, we realize our hero—the son of an incestuous union between father and daughter, Vespucci and Angelica (Mogor's mother)—*confuses* the very genealogies of inheritance upon which these empires rest. The elderly women Akbar summons to confirm the Mogor's unsavory claims finally acknowledge their complicity in writing the exquisite Qara Köz out of history: "It is a fact that he has told us things that have been buried very deep. [They murmur] Had he not spoken up then we old women would have taken the story to our graves" (141). The unwilling admission is wrested from the heart of power by the untimely skeleton

in the closet that is Mogor dell' Amore, the Mughal of Love; and subsequently, we are treated to the classic convulsions of the byzantine birth stories we have come to expect from Rushdie. On full disclosure, the birth story reveals Niccoló (alias Ucello or Mogor) to be cosmopolitan not by design, not out of the natural privilege of aristocrats, but out of sheer historical necessity. As he drifts from world to world in search of a home, his sense of mutuality is born of dislocation—a historical lesson we might learn to our advantage, Rushdie suggests, his charming portrait of the enduring eternal foreigner. The cosmopolitan who can dream in seven languages will not inherit empires, but, at the very least, he has won the right to tell a global history eclipsed in the narrow enterprise of *realpolitik*.

But the right to tell comes at the cost of a precarious life, as Mogor is driven from city to city, much like his fabled grandmother whose genealogy hails from Genghis Khan to Timur. If Mogor is the figure of cultural mutuality, she practices the arts of embodied mutuality—the ability to love across battlelines, the capacity to rule both Sikri and Florence by her sheer beauty. Therefore *her* story (that he narrates) bristles with rambunctious sex, Qara Köz' real cosmopolitan legacy; by the novel's close, loving beyond generations, she has seduced her great-nephew, the Emperor Akbar. As the imaginative king ruminates on the role of fantasy (figured as Jodha Bai, the apparition who rules his harem) in the exercise of power, sex interrupts the hardy work of *realpolitik*. The story of passion following Qara Köz' phantom tread across Central Asia and the Middle East stills time; in her hands, the history of empires grinds to a standstill, Sikri and Florence materializing as sensuous pasts undisturbed by political victories, defeats, campaigns, wars, and strife. Passion emerges as the true enemy of empires, the harbinger of peace, the image of a vibrant mutuality across difference poetically figured in Qara Köz and comically exteriorized in Mogor's two loves, the corpulent Mattress and the emaciated Skeleton. And yet mortality, hounding the flesh that pleasures, returns in the story in diseases, decay, poisonings, punishments, and physical harm, even as the emperor, momentarily lulled into incestuous ecstasy, wonders when Qara Köz will disappear: "I have come home," she told him. "You have allowed me to return,

and so here I am, at my journey's end. And now, Shelter of the World, I am yours.' *Until you're not*, the Universal Ruler thought. *My love, until you're not*" (443). With her Sikri will pass, he thinks, like Florence in the tale he has just heard—one more mirage of ever-mutable cosmopolitan pasts.

And so in these tales, once upon a time there was cosmopolitanism. The fairytale seduces, but does not reassure since empires and cities fade; cosmopolitanism appears as sheer potentiality once more *to be* actualized. Behind the global history these novels assemble, behind their imaginative cartographies, we see the dim fear-driven shape of our interconnected worlds. Living in the mutuality born of historical necessity, we ask again: when was cosmopolitanism? Can cosmopolitan pasts teach us how to become cosmopolitan once more?

* * *

Best to close where we began, with the open wound that will not go away; best to close with what is always the exception, Palestine, as the center of the historical urgency for enchanted pasts; best to close with affiliation to the yearning voice to which this essay is dedicated:

I really have very little time for the idea of belonging to a national community. It seems to me not very interesting. And above all not very nourishing intellectually. I find it so disappointing. And so impoverishing, that the spontaneity of affiliations, rather than filiations, are what I really cherish. (Ali *Conversations*, 120)

Notes

- 1 The text is based on an interview recorded at Edward Said's Riverside Drive apartment in New York City (June 1994); the interview was first edited into a documentary, *A Conversation with Edward Said* (Bandung Film production for Channel Four, British television), 1994.
- 2 The longer version was the one Scott hoped to release in the theaters, but Twentieth Century Fox vetoed the decision and refused to advertise the release of the director's cut (December 2005). The extended version became available on DVD May 2006.

- 3 Gowariker's critique of religious orthodoxy is once again apparent in two spectacular music sequences: the *manmohana* episode, featuring the privacy of devotion better known as *bhakti*, a popular religious and social movement that ran against the dictates of institutionalized faith; and the Sufi dance that lures the Emperor into a rare display of ecstasy, with Sufism, once more, a syncretic faith, tolerant of the private ecstasies of all.
- 4 Gowariker had already made a splash as the daring new director of the cultural behemoth that is Bollywood (the moniker for the commercial Bombay-based Hindi-language film industry that reinvented itself after India's trade liberalization, 1991) in *Lagaan* (2001), nominated for an Oscar. No wonder he was able to pull off financing this massive venture with its extravagant sets, costumes, and star salaries.
- 5 Several historians insist there was no Jodha Bai (there is no mention of her, for instance, in the *Akbarnama*), Akbar's favorite queen, although the Rajput Harkha Bai who converted to Islam and became Marian-uz-Zamani (referred to first in the eighteenth-century *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri*) is possibly the source of the legend; the great love thesis is made "historical," in Lieutenant Colonel James Todd's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, a century later. Whatever the scholarly debates, the *legend* would hold as Hindu and Muslims eyed each other with increasing suspicion under a land rent by British divide and rule policies. Its persistence in contemporary India, past partition and post-partition riots, Gowariker seems to suggest, is a sign of the popular desire to remake history—if only to heal the present.
- 6 Early reviews compared the film to previous acclaimed Bombay period films featuring the beloved Akbar, most memorably K. Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) with its star royalty (Prithviraj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, Durga Khote). But soon criticisms abated in light of the film's obvious privileging of the love story above any periodizing imperative.
- 7 Youssef Chahine's *The Victorious Saladin* (*Al-Nasir Salah al-Din* 1963), often read as a rebuttal of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Crusades* (1935), is a three-hour epic spectacular scripted by Naguib Mahfouz that draws thinly-veiled parallels between Nasser and the historical Salah al-Din—both tolerant, strong leaders with significant impact on the Middle East's relationship with the (historical) West.
- 8 Writing about newly opened global markets for "Indian writing in English," my first book, *When Borne*, argued for the potential of a situated cosmopolitanism to intervene in national and regional politics and culture. Written soon after the *Public Culture* volume on cosmopolitanism, there I argued for literature, in the hands of the fourth generation of Indian writers in English (who share Rushdie's thematic and stylistic preoccupations), as a situated cosmopolitics. For other treatments of cosmopolitanism in novels, see Walkowitz and, more recently, Schoene on cosmopolitanism and literature.

- 9 “Touching my junk” is the phrase used by a passenger boarding a plane in San Diego who aggressively challenged a TSA official for a pat down. For full story, see: <http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2010/11/tsa-investigating-passenger>
- 10 For Beck, Latour, Cheah and Robbins, and Brennan, to name just a few interlocutors of cosmopolitanism, the term still provides an optic for our structural location in global exchanges.
- 11 The introduction to the *Public Culture* volume (12.3, Fall 2000) on cosmopolitanism, co-written by Breckenridge, Pollock, Bhabha, and Chakrabarty, describes cosmopolitanism to be a “sense of mutuality under conditions of mutability” (578).
- 12 See Williams on “structures of feeling” that are not yet cognitively an emergent formation.
- 13 I am quoting Caruth’s famous designation of trauma memory and its tellings: literature, Caruth maintains, always a story told in another time and another place, effectively serves as working through trauma memory; its indirections and deferrals precisely disallow a full (and impossible) confrontation of the traumatic event.
- 14 Gowariker (post-*Lagaan*) and Scott (post-*Alien*), too, are well-respected *auteurs* with their signature directorial styles; but as industrial products, their films are just as much judged by box office returns as they are by awards and critical reviews in the press. In this sense, literary novels (as opposed to pulp fiction) are slightly different; limited commercial proceeds are far less important to assessments of their cumulative value.
- 15 Born in a South-Asian Muslim family in Lahore, Ali, like Rushdie, was radicalized in 1960s England and gained cultural prominence in the black British anti-Thatcherite milieu of the 1980s. He has just recently completed the Islamic quintet with *The Night of the Golden Butterfly*, a series of works that spans Islamic empires and cultures over several centuries.
- 16 Rushdie launches a critique of Hindu fundamentalism in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, but in a subdued and hidden manner (see Ghosh, “Invitation”). *The Enchantress of Florence* is his first full return to Islamic history (via the benevolent pluralist Akbar) after the infamous *The Satanic Verses* (1988).
- 17 Rushdie mentioned his reading of *Jodha Akbar* at a casual conversation before his talk on *Enchantress* (conducted by Pico Iyer) for the University of California, Santa Barbara Arts and Lectures series, May 4, 2008. He noted his labours with history, which include an accurate representation of Jodha Bai as a composite *figment* of Emperor Akbar’s imagination—the phantasmatic Hindu equivalent to Qara Köz.
- 18 Ucello steals Elizabeth I’s letter to her contemporary, Jalaluddin Mohammed Akbar, from a Scottish captain of a pirate ship that had been sent to India on state business. This early act establishes his character as a clever charlatan who lives by his wits. The letter, he knows, will transform him into legitimate emis-

- sary, granting him the Mughal emperor's ear for the longer story that festers in him like an unhealed wound.
- 19 See Barker's elaboration of the term in *The Tactile Eye*.
- 20 Engaging in trauma theory, Sarkar sees the work of cinema as both critiquing official nationalist accounts of the partition as historical event even as it engages with the affects of trauma through audiovisual technologies.
- 21 See Hutcheon's famous essay on historical meta-fiction for a reading of the sub-genre as postmodern.
- 22 This is a thinly-veiled reference (*Saladin* 11) to the *Satanic Verses* affair, when Ali came out in Rushdie's defense, naming him a "warrior" writer. Soon after, Ali would turn to historical fiction, to join the campaign for retelling Islamic history (misinterpreted in the West and by Islamic fundamentalists, alike).

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Enchanted Pasts as Global History

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