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From barbarism to decadence without the intervening civilization: or, living in the aftermath of anticipated futures

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ABSTRACT

The styles, moods, performances, and practices of decadence have been simultaneous with modernization, not least in the process of nation-building. This article considers the dialectics of decadence and modernization with particular attention to the roles and responses of women in the twentieth to twenty-first centuries. World-historically, this was the emergence of self-governing dominions of Anglophone cultures, increasing US influence, and decolonization. Eighty-five states gained independence since 1922, with the African nation-states after 1956. While nationalist projects often deferred the Woman Question, liberal projects of New Womanism initiated debate between feminist individualism and more collectivist practices and ideologies. Movements like social Darwinism and eugenics impacted on women, and in terms of deformed relations of part to whole (a classic definition of decadence), modernization included the great unification movements of the “Pans” – Pan-Hellenism, -Islamism, -Asianism, -Africanism, and Zionism – but also the partitions of India/Pakistan, Palestine/Israel, the PRC/Taiwan, Ireland, Korea, Vietnam, and Cyprus, which often impacted women unequally. Under processes of globalization and nation-building, modernization and expressions of decadence have been in dialectical relations, though the meanings and targets shift as hegemony rise and fall.

KEYWORDS

Decadence; modernization; globalization; nationalism; women; feminism; sex

In the many recent online academic speaker series on decadence during the COVID-19 pandemic – Exeter’s Zooming Decadence, NAVSA’s, BADS’, Vernon Lee Society’s, *inter alia* – decadence usually appears as a practice of looking at, reifying, fetishizing others’ worlds; a mood of looking nostalgically at one’s own declining world; and a practice of performing, parodying, and imitating, including commercial opportunism. The hearty reception of these series across multiple international time zones collectively suggests that we are very at home with decadence, with its combinations of heedlessness, economic stagnation, institutional decay, and deformation of social relations. What is this decadent world that seems so familiar to us? I have been arguing for some time that the styles, moods, performances, and practices of decadence proliferate at moments when traditional cultures meet the forces of modernization and social relations

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undergo processes of deformation.¹ This follows nineteenth-century accounts of decadence by Désiré Nisard, Paul Bourget, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Havelock Ellis as a distorted relation of part to whole and by Walter Benjamin as “the excesses and crudities of art which [...] emerge from the core of its richest historical energies.”² In my 2018 book, *Literatures of Liberalization*, I discussed decadence as it appears in different literatures e.g., *tuijiadang*, *tuifei* (Chinese); *taito*, *taibai*, *tambi*, *uto*, *noto*, *darak* (Japanese); *inhitat*, *inkiraz* (Arabic) – and its most common tropes, such as the decadent, isolated individual, extreme self-consciousness, expressed suffering, self-contempt to the point of self-murder, aestheticism, ennui and *taedium vitae*, and resentment. In “The Geopolitics of Decadence,” I focus on the political-economic conditions of modernization and the cosmopolitanism and progressivism that resisted, and continue to resist, them, concluding with what Kobayashi Hideo in 1933 called the “literature of the lost home.”

This current article is on global processes of political, economic, and technological modernization and their corresponding expressions of decadence as cultures looked at, reified, and fetishized each other at moments of contact: a dialectics of decadence and modernization. It considers decadence with particular attention to the roles and responses of women under the specific conditions of global modernization in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. World-historically, this period marks the emergence of the self-governing dominions of Anglophone cultures of Australia (1901), New Zealand (1907), and South Africa (1910) (with Canada in 1867), increasing US global influence, and decolonization. Eighty-five states gained independence since 1922, with the African nation-states after 1956. Although specialists such as Peter Alter see nationalism as an ideology that is “no match for the great bodies of thought that constitute socialism or liberalism, the two other great ideologies originating in the late 18th and 19th centuries,”³ it is an ideology in symbiosis with decadence, and some of the more formative expressions of nationalism have been through dialectics with decadence.⁴ Modern nationalism in long established states, as opposed to postcolonial or revolutionary states, is typically “a shelter and refuge from the challenges of life[. ...] In times of political and social oppression, of profound changes in society and economic crises.”⁵

While nationalist projects often deferred the Woman Question, simultaneous movements of liberalism/liberalization often included global forms of New Womanism – such as the May Fourth movement (China), Meiji Restoration (Japan), Tanzimat (Turkey), and the Arab Enlightenment or *Nahdah* – initiating debate between feminist individualism and more collectivist practices. Ideologies and movements such as social Darwinism and eugenics impacted on women, and in terms of deformed relations of part to whole (a classic definition of decadence), the period included the great unification movements of the “Pans” – Pan-Hellenism, -Islamism, -Asianism, -Africanism, and Zionism – but also the partitions of India/Pakistan, Palestine/Israel, the People’s Republic of China (PRC)/Taiwan, Ireland, Korea, Vietnam, and Cyprus that often impacted women unequally. Under processes of globalization and nation-building, modernization and expressions of decadence have been in dialectical relations, though the meanings and targets shift as hegemony rises and falls.

I. Modern life and labor in the nation-state

I begin with a recent work of looking at, reifying, fetishizing, and commercial opportunism that demonstrates some of the themes of decadence. An HBO series entitled

Industry, about young apprentice traders in the City, London's financial district, appeared in autumn 2020, in which 20-somethings of various races, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities know very little, yet control the wealth on which so many livelihoods depend. Early on in the eight episodes, I was struck by the graphic and numerous sex scenes, reminiscent of Pasolini's *Salò* (1975), also about captive youth in a decadent society. Sex among the young traders in *Industry* is not about love, desire (hotness), or even just fun, but about release from the stress of intolerable working conditions, akin to a fierce workout in the gym or running a marathon. The protagonists often wear gym clothes while having sex. In a holiday season normally devoted to romantic comedies, I was puzzled by sex as a mere release from intolerable stress. This led me to reflect on the title *Industry*, which initially baffled me: there is little industry in bonds trading, at least in the traditional senses of Latin *industria* (diligence, hard work) or of manufacturing or businesses that produce particular kinds of goods or services. In the Industrial Revolution, *industry* particularly distinguished factory work (*industrial scale*) from hand-and-guild craftsmanship, and produced (*production industries*) the great commodity markets such as textiles and steel. Simply moving numerical values across a computer screen would not normally count as industry. Yet in watching the young, cocaine-fueled traders having sex, I was reminded of two characters from the Industrial Revolution *par excellence*, the "surplus population" and Poor Law theorist Thomas Robert Malthus, who condemned the unemployed to the workhouses, and their defender, the agricultural activist William Cobbett, who defended sex among the poor as "the greatest of all compensations for their inevitable cares, troubles, hardships, and sorrows of life."⁶ The youth are evidently in the position of nineteenth-century industrial workers – workers and surplus population for whom sex is the only compensation for intolerable working conditions and precarity. Whereas the Victorian theorist of decadence Arthur Symons listed a sexual excitement largely mental (fantasy) as a characteristic of decadent literatures, *Industry* depicts sex as reductively physical, vitalist, a mere release from tension. And mere physical vitalism, or the unconscious survival of the fittest, was also often a sign of decadence.

Yet perhaps sex like that in Cobbett and *Industry* – as release from the inevitable cares, troubles, hardships, and sorrows of life – is actually more common, in modernity, than romance, which is technically the search for the object of desire. In Bessie Head's accounts of sex in Botswana when refugees were fleeing South Africa under Apartheid, women outnumbered men and often shared them, and men treated sex as mechanical evacuation:

The social defects of Africa are, first, the Africa man's loose, carefree sexuality; it hasn't the stopgaps of love and tenderness and personal romantic treasuring of women. It is just sex, but it is not obscene because the women have a corresponding mental and physical approach.⁷

Head's protagonist Elizabeth in her autobiographical work of fiction *A Question of Power* (1974) even approves of a statement on Oscar Wilde's trials, "it doesn't really matter where a man evacuates."⁸ In Head's Botswana, women garden, cook, farm, and bear children, while men herd cattle on outposts in the bush, separate worlds in a gendered division of labor. The social world is further divided by petty tribal hierarchies with often degenerate local kings and servants who collude with corrupt politicians in the service of foreign capital.

Head was born in 1937 in a psychiatric hospital in Pietermaritzburg to a white mother and an unknown, black father. She was “returned” by her first foster family when she began to develop black physical characteristics.⁹ She was then adopted by a “coloured” family, until she was again placed in a mission boarding school. As *A Question of Power* notes, her mother died in hospital when Head was six. Head worked as a journalist and political activist, married and gave birth to a son, separated from her husband, and moved with her son in 1964 to permanent exile in Botswana, where she worked as a teacher, typist, gardener, and writer, suffering severe episodes of mental dislocation, sometimes described as schizophrenia. She died in Serowe in 1986 of alcohol-induced hepatitis. Brought up in a Catholic environment, she attended school at an Anglican mission and read widely in the M. L. Sultan library in Durban, where she encountered Hinduism. She was familiar with the Bible, Buddhism, and Islam.¹⁰ Although Head herself objected to labels, believing that “political camps [...] falsify truth,”¹¹ Mary S. Lederer emphasizes the plural ways that she is interpreted today: as feminist, postcolonial, political, spiritual, African in terms of ethnicity, or of national identity. Kolawole Ogungbesan and Isabella Matsikidze saw that, unlike most African writers of the period, Head did not equate individuality with alienation.¹² *A Question of Power* depicts Head’s delusional breakdowns as Manichaean struggles with two demons, Dan and Sello, who in scenes of orgiastic violence and witchcraft fight for her soul. Yet the best of Head’s characters, such as Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), use the tribal base as a foundation for cooperation and communal uplift, modernizing agriculture and animal husbandry through co-operatives of villagers. And much of the texture of Head’s work arises from the contrast between the decadence of racist, sexist brutality and exploitation and a socialist vision of cooperation and sharing. Such contrasts between decadence and hope, as we shall see, characterize much of the literature of global modernism.

In a recent collection on South African literature, the co-editor Rita Barnard uses the expression “living in the aftermath of anticipated futures” to explain the decaying optimism of post-Apartheid South Africa.¹³ What was originally said about the United States – that it had passed from barbarism to decadence without the intervening civilization – might also be said of South Africa, which has passed from the barbarism of colonization and Apartheid to the decadence of neoliberalism, with its obscene juxtapositions of extreme poverty with glamorous consumption, and its corruption, extortion, and cronyism throughout the political sphere. One could go further, of course, to say that the barbarism of colonization brought decadence to the kingdoms and peoples of Africa, but writers like Head and, indeed, most modern women writers on the continent have not romanticized precolonial Africa. The hope and promise of decolonization, independence, and the fall of Apartheid were eroded by ruling elites representing the interests of multinational capital at the expense of the economically deprived masses. The writings of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Helon Habila, and Ama Ata Aidoo in West Africa; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Nuruddin Farah, and Peter Nazareth in East Africa; Elizabeth Eybers, Mary Faulkner, and Athol Fuggard in Southern Africa; and Assia Djebar, Naguib Mahfouz, and Mohamed Choukri in the North have continuously criticized corruption, often with the tropes of literary decadence. While Achebe depicted how various “shades of corruption, bribery, fraud, nepotism, theft, ostentatious wasteful expenditure, and misplaced priorities”¹⁴ undermined the establishment of a rational and planned economic order in Nigeria, more recently Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*

(2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013) foreground the constant economic struggles of Nigerians and the ways that leaders fail them.¹⁵ The issues of African modernity – African socialisms, “race,” international development ethics, poverty and suffering, community and civic responsibility,¹⁶ women’s role in the new constitutions, national coalitions, and women’s charters¹⁷ – around which so much effort was expended in the 1990s, have lost to the economic policies of globalization.

Contemporary South African literature shows that, despite political change, little has changed post-Apartheid, and that the Warwick Research Collective’s (WReC’s) notion of combined and uneven development explains the resulting socio-economic stagnation.¹⁸ Jane Poyner’s *The Worlding of the South African Novel* (2020) documents the limits of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s rights discourse; the structural inequality of women; AIDS as state genocide; white (dis)possession; health and environmental injustice; and current class apartheid, all showing the tragedy of post-Apartheid South Africa, living in the aftermath of anticipated futures. Lindsay Clowes at the University of the Western Cape, with the largest gender studies program in South Africa, writes of the high levels of gender-based violence, yet also points out that, for every woman killed by male violence, 4.5 men are killed by male violence. Yet, while Clowes is clear that gender is relational, and that for men to engage with feminist theory would be transformative if not revolutionary for everyone, the assumption of most students is that gender studies is only for women and LGBTQ+ people.

In a landmark collection of women’s writing in South Africa in 1996, the editor M. J. Daymond predicted that language would be an issue in the future. South Africa has 11 official languages, and some of these are so inflected by gender that married women have been required by custom to “reshape radically their vocabularies in order to convey respect for their husband and his family.”¹⁹ Genres linked to gender and place, such as women’s storytelling, have survived, while men’s more public speech has decayed with their living conditions.²⁰ The other main issue predicted by Daymond was sexuality, and both gender and linguistic code switching have been increasingly studied as counters to masculine authoritarianism in both white and black nationalisms.²¹ Chike Mgbéadichie, for example, is researching a rare phenomenon in Ubang, a community in the Nigerian state of Cross River, where women and men speak completely different languages.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who famously challenged the use of English among African writers, wrote of three ages of revolutions in China, India, and Africa beginning in the 1950s and of their subsequent decay. In Ngũgĩ’s view, the 1960s national independence movements began to be destabilized by western capitalism, US imperialism, and their puppet regimes. The 1970s brought in neocolonialism under US-dominated transnational financial and industrial monopolies.²² Feminist theorists have noted women writers’ alignment with the oppressed from colonization through post-Apartheid, from 1880s white writers Olive Schreiner and Frances Colenso to Nadine Gordimer to “coloured” and black writers like Bessie Head and the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta. Both Head and Emecheta have written from African realist perspectives of the western fetishism of sex, contrasting it with the noncompanionate family in Africa, in which fathers following labor markets are often absent from home, strong mothers may be resented by sons, and women continue to be subordinate. Yet South Africa’s was the first constitution in the world to prohibit discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in

1996,²³ and it is well known that it was colonial administrators who enforced heterosexual/homosexual binaries and female domesticity, while eradicating more diverse pre-colonial relationships, identities, and practices, as was also the case on the Indian subcontinent and in the Arab world.²⁴

What is perceived as decadent in a particular culture depends on where that culture has been and where it thinks it is going, so ideologies of progress and development, for nation-states as well as for individuals, invite fears of decadence. “We are at the mid-point of the scream,” wrote D. Marechera of modern Europe as represented in its literature,

when internal corruption leads to actual physical transformation[, ...] metamorphosis as myth changes into metamorphosis as a historical nightmare [...] frozen in that monstrous midway as in the film *The Fly*, when an experiment goes wrong and the scientist is changed into a grotesque shape that is neither fly nor human being but something in between.²⁵

In post- or neo-colonial cultures undergoing processes of modernization, aesthetic literature – literature for its own sake or for the sake of entertainment – was considered a luxury of the decadent West, a commodity in a decadent consumer culture. Africa’s greatest writers are also its greatest critics, write Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson of a consensus on the historical function of African literatures to serve society.²⁶ Whether modernism was a decadent form, apolitical, anti-nationalist, and tainted by western notions of artistic autonomy, as some of the socialists argued, or had an “essential connection” to African nationalism, as Simon Gikandi has argued in distinguishing African from European modernism,²⁷ everyone agreed that the African artist/writer had social responsibility. An estimated 413 million people in Africa currently live in extreme poverty, more than half of the world’s total. Nigeria alone has approximately 96 million people in extreme poverty, 48% of the country’s population. From Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreter* (1965) and Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1966), where corruption repeatedly frustrates economic development, to Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), which exposes and condemns economic mismanagement in Ghana, and his *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), which details the lack of economic planning, African writers have seen their role as pre-eminently social.

Njabulo S. Ndebele listed the challenges for Africa in 1994: the adaptability of scientific method and practice, the psychology of the co-opted politician, the pressures of modern life on family, consumer culture versus revolutionary consciousness, rural culture versus that of the white oppressor.²⁸ The activist Albie Sachs had already begun a critical self-clarification of a specific African National Congress revolutionary “personality” in 1990, and the literary scholar and theorist Abiola Irele had studied an African ambivalence regarding the “practical necessity” of Western modernity, science, and technology in 1982.²⁹ Each of these also noted one of the key issues and tropes in what they perceived as dialectics of modernity: the scope and limits of western individualism in modernizing collective or communal cultures, an issue that had been central to decadence since Baudelaire. Rabindranath Tagore had noted similar issues in 1916 when he defined modernism as freedom of mind explicitly contrasted with paternalism and imperialism:

True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage to European schoolmasters. It is science, but not its wrong application in life, – a mere imitation of our science teachers who reduce it into a superstition absurdly invoking its aid for all impossible purposes.³⁰

In 1936, Mulk Raj Anand and Premchand (Dhanpat Rai) – whose classic Hindi novel *Godaan* (1936, English trans. *The Gift of a Cow* 1968) is referenced at the very end of Head's *A Question of Power* – under the auspices of the Progressive Writers' Association, decried the decadence of colonial India and sought

to rescue literature and other arts from the priestly, academic and decadent classes in whose hands they have degenerated so long; to bring the arts into the closest touch with the people; and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead to the future.³¹

In his speech in Lucknow (epicenter of a time-honored kingdom labeled decadent by the Raj), Premchand defined the writer as:

By nature, progressive. He [*sic*] probably would not have been a litterateur if this were not his nature. He feels inadequacy inside as well as outside himself. He must remain restless in order to fulfil this deficiency. He does not perceive the individual and society in those conditions of happiness and freedom in which he wants to see them in his imagination. For this reason, he always feels dissatisfied with the present mental and social conditions. He wants to end these disgusting conditions so that the world become a better place to live in and die in.³²

In 1951, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar, a *muhafazakar* or conservative obsessed with the duality of the Ottoman past and Turkish present, perceived a psychological condition in Turkish literature that had something like the psychological richness of Baudelaire's famous description of decadence as “a melancholy splendour [...] the marvellous allegory of a soul [...] going down beyond the horizon, with a magnificent wealth of thoughts and dreams.”³³ Tanpinar writes:

There remains a fact that I will call the sickness – if I were brave, I would say psychosis – of civilizational change, which takes the form of a struggle between the New and the Old, which is maybe not well constituted, or maybe not so precise, or changes its nature according to its current phase in progression; this struggle continues through contrived *terkip* [a melded identity within Republican Turkey: Turkish, Ottoman, and Western] in the form of a psychological richness, even – which does not constrain the communal life generated by this struggle[...] As the continual placement of stone over two or three generations eventually creates a building so was it like this; people adopted an identity that was won over time [...] [since the Tanzimat]. Our society's inner and outer outlook changed from generation to generation. Our women entered life. Our society got used to Western thought and art, our people were introduced to machines, the state became European.³⁴

Walter Benjamin had similarly reflected on

critical periods in which the particular form strains after effects which can be easily achieved only with [...] a new art form. The excesses and crudities of art which thus result, *particularly in periods of so-called decadence*, actually emerge from the core of its richest historical energies.³⁵

Like Tagore, Adūnīs sees “true modernity” as “a way of seeing before it is production” and Western modernity's struggles as superficial in comparison with internal conflicts in Arabic between tradition in the Qur'ān and modern innovation.³⁶ The *Nahdah*, or Arab Renaissance, focused attention on reified (Islamic) tradition and reified (Western) technique. Adūnīs concedes that it was Western decadents who taught him to perceive the modern innovators in historical Islam: “I find no paradox in declaring

that it was recent Western modernity [Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Nerval, Breton] which led me to discover our own, older, modernity.”³⁷ Adūnīs takes us to places beyond dichotomies, asking whether language is a tool or an end in itself, an instrument for knowledge production and acquisition or something that “precedes thought and is succeeded by knowledge.”³⁸ Such questions go deeper than false antinomies of Eurocentric modernity and reactive essential “tradition.” Nonetheless, Adūnīs understood the colonial imposition of “consumerist forms” as contributing to “an obliteration of personality; [...] a borrowed mind, a borrowed life. This culture teaches not only the consumption of things but also the consumption of human beings.”³⁹

Other expressions of “the world in a state of diseased decadence” are easily found in the feminist poet Forough Farrokhzad’s 1967 call for new Persian words to resist the perfected stasis of classical poetic tradition and the perceived continuities between neoclassicism and masculine authoritarianism⁴⁰; in Hirato Renkichi’s “Manifesto of the Japanese Futurist Movement”⁴¹; in the fascist response of Normil G. Sylvain to the US occupation of Haiti; or in the 1932 Caribbean “*Légitime Défense: Déclaration*” of “la bourgeoisie de couleur française” against “the abominable system of constraints and restrictions, the extermination of love and the confinement of dream, generally known under the name of Western civilization.”⁴² Elsewhere I have analyzed Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission* (2015), fantasizing the Islamization of France, as an antidote to the decadence of the West.⁴³

In an admirably balanced article that brings the shifting expressions of decadence up to our current moment, Liu Kang discusses three functions of the internet in contemporary China. First, as a new press; second, as a “virtual public sphere” alongside state media; and third as a new site for literacy production, notably in a country of 1.4 billion that grew from 1% literacy at the founding of the PRC in 1949 to 96% in its first 50 years. Censorship is much less than many Western commentators like to admit, but Liu’s question is whether the internet in the PRC “leads to a democratic public sphere or a nursery for social antagonism.”⁴⁴ A nursery for social antagonism is the way many in the PRC see the “free” internet of the west, a decadent space of violent antagonism, consumerism, and egotism. Liu Kang concludes: “The internet’s a critical arena in which new forms of domination, inequality, and exclusion fight with forces for democracy and justice. Such a battle is thoroughly deterritorialized and China is no exception.”⁴⁵

China’s internal critiques of decadence go back to Confucius and the sixth century, with charges of effeminacy in Tang Palace Style poetry. During the twentieth century, China moved from a patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal family structure within agricultural society, to a revolutionary and then urban industrial society, structurally shifting power from the family to the state.⁴⁶ Communist women’s equality, although compromised as a concession by the Party to keep male peasants onside, nonetheless made significant advances after 1949 and indeed was a major platform of Chairman Mao.⁴⁷ Yet from 1978, under the Opening-up, gender differences began to re-emerge, and calls for refeminization opposed western “masculine women.”⁴⁸ More recently, “entrepreneurial,” or commercial, sex has renewed forms of masculinity and femininity. Each of these movements brought accusations of decadence, from the decadent Confucian traditions opposed by Mao Zedong, to the decadent westernized masculine woman, to today’s decadent “Kong Girl” or native Hong Kong girl with her “penchant for luxury goods, insistence on a boyfriend who pays, and any

opportunity to be the center of attention.”⁴⁹ Yet homosexuality was decriminalized in the PRC in 1997, depathologized in 2001, and the new queer cinema sometimes even provides Marxist alternatives to the more familiar queer liberalism. Even among the Newer, New Humanity (*Xin xin ren lei*), or the internet generation born into a regime of globalization and technocracy, there are still remnants of revolutionary idealism that resist decadent (Western) consumerism and egotism.⁵⁰ *Tongzhi*, or *comrade* since the founding of the Soviet-inspired PRC, replaced most traditional titles and is now widely used for LGBTQ+, code-mixing and multilingualism again being deployed for gender fluidity. Modern China, in particular, shows that decadence is an epithet “that relies entirely on the norm it implicitly calls up”⁵¹ and shifts as cultures and ideologies shift.

II. Modern love and money under globalization

In an interview with the South African writer Ivan Vladislavić, I asked him:

A recent collection on South African writing says that, post-Apartheid, the country is ‘living in the aftermath of anticipated futures.’ Does this seem right to you? If so, how might South Africa make those futures? What is the role of the writer in those futures?⁵²

Vladislavić answered affirmatively, and that the writer’s role was the same as it always was, to depict the world accurately. He went on to explain that the sources of South Africa’s stasis were economic, that only an alteration in the material base would reverse the decline. This is the case in many nation-states under conditions of neoliberal globalization, which is why decadence today seems so familiar to us, and which returns us to Bessie Head’s admiration, at the end of *A Question of Power*, for Premchand. In Premchand’s novel *Godaan*, the protagonist farmer’s son leaves his village of Belari for the city Lucknow, where his hopes for a better life are disappointed. In the misery of city life, his only consolation is sex:

There was no other recreation available. The workmen and *ekka* drivers [horse-drawn carriage in which riders sit on a platform over the two wheels] in the neighbourhood played cards and gambled all night. Previously he had played a lot too, but now the only thing that interested him was making love to Jhuniya. She very soon tired of this kind of life, longing for a place where she could go off by herself and sleep completely undisturbed.⁵³

Jhuniya, under these circumstances, is a sex and reproduction machine (although she “had been a mother twice, she knew nothing about raising children, and whenever Mangal annoyed her, she would curse and scold him”)⁵⁴:

While she was laying down [their son] would come, force his way onto her chest, take a nipple in his mouth and begin chewing on it. He was two years old now and his teeth were very sharp. When no milk came, he’d get angry and sink his teeth into her breast, but Jhuniya no longer had even the strength to push him away. Death seemed to be standing constantly in front of her. She felt no love for either the child or his father. All people cared about was their own interests. During the rainy season, when Lallu came down with diarrhoea and stopped nursing, Jhuniya was conscious only that one of her afflictions had been relieved. A week later, however, when the boy died, his memory stirred her to tears.⁵⁵

Gobar goes to work in a factory, again showing the gendered division of labor noted by Head that obviates companionate relations:

Gobar had to start out early in the morning, and by the time he returned home at dusk after a full day's work, there was not a spark of life left in his body. In the village he'd been forced to work just as hard, but he had never felt the least bit tired. The work had been interspersed with laughter and conversation, and the open fields and broad skies had seemed to ease the strain. However hard his body worked there, his mind had remained free. Here, although his body was taxed less, the hubbub, the speed and the thundering noise weighed him down. There was also the constant apprehension of rebuke. The workers were all in the same boat and they drowned their physical fatigue and mental weariness in palm toddy or cheap liquor. Gobar took to drinking also. By the time he reached home, the night would be late and he would be staggering drunk. Finding some excuse or other, he would swear at Jhuniya, threaten to throw her out of the house, and sometimes even beat her.⁵⁶

This subplot of urban migration may be more characteristic of global modernization than the mature Modernisms of western literature. Premchand's aesthetic was imbued with progressivist discourses of post-1917 socialism and Gandhian critiques of caste, feudalism, and exploitation. *Godaan* is a critique of a decadent society of remorseless money-lending, extortion, and indebtedness across all classes and castes, though catastrophe falls most relentlessly on the poorest. "The law courts and police and so forth are all supposed to be for our protection, but no one really protects us. There's just looting all round."⁵⁷ All classes and castes are consumed by petty rivalries, status anxiety, and prestige, with "cruelty, deceit, effrontery and oppression" characterizing the elite in particular.⁵⁸ Structurally, the novel is like Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845), alternating scenes between the wealthy zamindars/professional classes/government officials and the poorest farmers and workers. There is very little sympathy among the groups, and a great deal of self-interest. "No one trusted anybody," but yet "there was no trace of communal hatred,"⁵⁹ which came later, after independence, when the departing British divided nations between Hindu and Muslim majorities.

Now we may also return to where we began, with the performed – for it does not matter whether it is authentic or not – inhumanity, sense of entitlement, and cold indifference of the young traders in *Industry*. The pathos of their sex lives is nonetheless eclipsed by the obscenity of their work lives. Offscreen, in the actual economy, billionaire wealth continues to surge while lives and livelihoods are lost. U.S. billionaires, primarily the IT profiteers, have gained over \$1 trillion during the pandemic so far and they now collectively own more than \$4 trillion in wealth, while their corporations underpaid their essential workers and overexposed them to the virus.⁶⁰ Such obscene levels of inequality are surely a sign of decadence in modern societies. The journalist Anne Applebaum recounted other signs, specifically those of the fascist takeover of Poland since the 2000s that were also practices of the US White House during the Trump administration and of the BJP under Modi in India: the appointment of new judges to support the government; takeover of the media; sacking of civil servants and generals; wreck of cultural institutions; sacking of professionals who are too efficient (thereby exposing their bosses); identification of existential enemies through antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, misogyny; and the return of blood-and-soil nationalists.

The modern moment, experienced at different times by different cultures, was based in hope for material and technological progress to be sure, but also for ethical, political, and, underpinning it all, educational progress. It appears that we have moved from the barbarisms of industrialism and imperialism to the decadence of capitalist neoliberalism without the intervening civilization, or the just, liberal societies for which most cultures

had hoped. Modern life and decadence, it seems, are never far apart, and the modern nation-state has often formed through dialectics with what its founders perceived as decadence. To quote the original decadents, the Romans, *ars longa, vita brevis*; art, and the education that comes through it, is slow, life is short.⁶¹ Civilization takes time, modernization moves fast. And we, we are living in the decadent aftermath of anticipated futures.

Since democracy, as an educated population of informed voters building the good society, appears to have been overtaken by events, it might be worth looking at one more woman's writing or, rather, not the writing but the widespread response to it. The films of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones Diary* are the most watched romantic comedies on Anglophone film and television, and a recent special on "Being Bridget Jones" gathered testimonies of its popularity among western women across classes, races, and ethnicities. It appears that the key to its popularity is Bridget Jones's ordinary non-perfection: she is plump, misspoken, error-prone, and, evidently, loveable. It appears that women take comfort in rejecting the narrative of progress to perfection, and in our commonality. Our fondness for the protagonist indicates our frustration with competitive individualism, the basis of western culture. Yet Bridget Jones's fans are not really rejecting western competitive individualism, but only expressing their frustration with it, forgiving ourselves for being neurotic about our appearance, selfish and earth-destroying in our consumption, unimaginative in our speech, and heteronomous mimics in our behavior. Unfortunately, resisting competitive individualism individually, learning to love ourselves just the way we are, is merely decadent, and has little to do with a civilized society, which is a collective effort. Head's novel *A Question of Power* ends,

She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man. As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging.⁶²

Western women let ourselves off the hook when we celebrate that we are not extraordinary, but that is not the same thing as the civilized solidarity of everyone wanting to be ordinary.

I asked a friend learned in Hindi, Urdu, and other South Asian languages about the eloquence of the peasant villagers in *The Gift of a Cow*. "They debate endlessly," I said,

with great articulateness, which is very unlike English fiction, in which the poor speak poorly, sparsely, and usually in dialect. Of course, I read Premchand in Roadarmel's translation. Does the original Hindi employ dialect or linguistic realism? How is it in Hindi fiction that peasants are so eloquent and skilled in debate?

His response, on a shared oral tradition, provides an alternative to our nurseries for social antagonism:

About the peasantry and the Dalit speakers being eloquent, it is not uncommon at all. These are people who may not have been to school but there are traditional structures of education and the oral tradition of learning the Puranas like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Gita. In the Hindi belt, most people across caste and class divides in the 19th and early 20th centuries would know their Ramcharitmanas and Kabir. Though they may not have been well-versed in secular discourses on equality and justice, they could always cite lines from these Puranas. They had internalised, even when they could not recite, words of traditional wisdom. In the presence

of Brahmans and zamindars, they were full of humility and displayed gestures of submission, but would not mind pleading for justice and speaking out their mind.⁵³

And *Godaan* is by no means slavishly modern on the topic of gender relations, a main theme of the novel being the roles and potential of women. These are initially seen in relation to male anger, cruelty, violence, greed, selfishness, and so forth. Yet ultimately the novel's most admirable protagonists – they are able to be admirable because they live above conditions of scarcity – repudiate “selfish individuality”⁶⁴ in lives of mutual service to the social good instead of what might have been the more predictable denouement for a bourgeois couple in a novel, romance.

Notes

1. See Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence, and Globalization; Literatures of Liberalization*, especially chapter 6 on “Global Literatures of Decadence”; and Gagnier, “The Geopolitics of Decadence.” See also Saler, *The Fin-de-Siècle World*.
2. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 237.
3. Alter, *Nationalism*, 118.
4. See also Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*; Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood*; and Greenfeld, *Nationalism: A Short History*.
5. Alter, *Nationalism*, 118.
6. Cobbett, cited from “Advice to Young Men” (1829) in Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, xxiii.
7. Head, *A Question of Power*, 145.
8. *Ibid.*, 146.
9. Eilersen, *Thunder*, 9–10.
10. See the famous epiphany in Head, *A Question of Power*: “There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet” (222).
11. Head, “Some Notes on Novel Writing,” 63. Cited in Lederer, *In Conversation with Bessie Head*, 193.
12. Lederer, *In Conversation with Bessie Head*, 20.
13. Barnard, “Introduction,” 7.
14. Okonkwo, “Economic Question,” 18.
15. See Mgbeadichie, “Beyond Story-telling.”
16. See Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy*.
17. See Daymond, *South African Feminisms*.
18. See also Bond, *Elite Transition*; and Hart, *Disabling Globalization*.
19. Daymond, *South African Feminisms*, xxxii.
20. *Ibid.*, xxxvii.
21. See McDonald on the Afrikaans poet Antjie Krog, indicating that the linguistic struggles were across class and ethnicity: “Fashioning her own singular idiom that would come to be dubbed ‘Antjiekaans’ and distinctively visceral feminist voice, she broke the linguistic, poetic, bibliographic, and patriarchal codes of the official language, challenged apartheid as well as the founding historical mythologies of the *volk*, and subjected the literary tradition and the act of writing itself to relentless, often sceptical scrutiny,” *Artefacts*, 212.
22. Ngũgĩ, *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers’ Conference*, 157.
23. Munro, “Queer Futures,” 753.
24. See Massad, *Desiring Arabs and Islam in Liberalism*; and Saler, *The Fin-de-Siècle World*.
25. Marechera, from *Zambezia*, 186–7.
26. Olaniyan and Quayson, *African Literature*, 101.
27. Gikandi has argued that modernism and nationalism arrived simultaneously on the continent and therefore writers did not necessarily share western modernists’ disenchantment

with modernity: whereas “Western [modernists] sought to use the ideology of modernism to undo nationalism, African artists adopted the same aesthetic ideology to imagine and will into being new nations. Nationalism has become a dirty word in some circles, but for the colonized it was a redemptive project that needed an aesthetic ideology in order to fulfil its mandate” (*Short Century*, 25).

28. Ndebele, *South African Literature and Culture*, 127–30.
29. Sachs, *Spring Is Rebellious*, 1990, 133–8; and Abiola Irele, “In Praise of Alienation: An Inaugural Lecture,” 600–4.
30. Tagore, “From Japan: A Lecture,” 247.
31. Anand, “Manifesto,” 249.
32. Cited in Premchand, *Godaan*, v.
33. Baudelaire, *Further Notes on Edgar Poe*, 189.
34. Tanpinar, “The Change of Civilization,” 205–7.
35. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 237.
36. Adūnīs, “From Poetics and Modernity,” 188, 186–90. See also Lazarus, “Modernism and African Literature,” 241.
37. Adūnīs, “From Poetics and Modernity,” 189.
38. *Ibid.*, 190.
39. *Ibid.*, 189.
40. Farrokhzad and Honarmandi, “Hasan Honarmandi’s Interview,” 221–3.
41. Renkichi, “Manifesto of the Japanese Futurist Movement,” 318.
42. Léro et al., “Légitime Défense,” 82.
43. Gagnier, *Literatures of Liberalization*, 151–8.
44. Kang, “The Internet in China,” 852.
45. *Ibid.*, 857.
46. Baumler, *Routledge Handbook of Revolutionary China*.
47. Riley, “Patriarchies Old and New,” 276–94.
48. Zheng, “Prostitution and Masculinity,” 233–47.
49. Zhang and Shin, “Language and the Construction of Difference,” 99–112, 109.
50. Bao, “Screening Sexualities,” 361–75.
51. Gilman, *Decadence*, 159.
52. Vladislavić, “Ivan Vladislavić in Conversation.”
53. Prechmand, *Godaan*, 337.
54. *Ibid.*, 407.
55. *Ibid.*, 338.
56. *Ibid.*, 339.
57. *Ibid.*, 424.
58. *Ibid.*, 395.
59. *Ibid.*, 225, 250.
60. Collins, “U.S. Billionaire Wealth Surges.”
61. This is already a decadent inversion of the original Greek, which put life before art: Ὁ βίος βραχύς, ἢ δὲ τέχνη μακρὴ (Hippocrates, “Aphorismi”).
62. Head, *A Question of Power*, 223.
63. With thanks to Professor Sumanyu Satpathy, former Head of the English Department, University of Delhi.
64. Prechmand, *Godaan*, 403.

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