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**DECOLONISATION AND THE FEMALE MIDDLEBROW:  
POLITICS, ECONOMICS AND THE NOVEL**

Anne Wetherilt

Thesis submitted towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English  
The Open University  
February 2024

## **CANDIDATE DECLARATION**

This thesis is entirely the work of the author and no part of it has previously been submitted for a degree or other qualification to this or any other university or institution.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines selected novels by five women writers, published between 1948 and 1972 – the decisive years encompassing the dissolution of the British Empire. The authors – Cecilie Leslie (1908-1988), Elspeth Huxley (1907-1997), Mary McMinnies (1920-?), Han Suyin (c. 1916/17-2012) and Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004)– occupied a unique vantage point, as they witnessed the process of decolonisation at first hand. My central claim is that women’s post-war novels reveal a much deeper engagement with the politics and economics of decolonisation than is usually ascribed to this fiction. Drawing on their journalistic backgrounds and personal experience of empire, the five women develop narratives which cast a critical eye on Britain’s imperial past and the post-imperial present. They interrogate official narratives of orderly withdrawal and successful stewardship; debate neocolonial legacies in the guise of infrastructure investments; challenge the discourse of development; and expose Britain’s complicated response to immigration.

The thesis also makes the case for viewing the novel of decolonisation as exemplary of the political middlebrow. The formal qualities of the middlebrow novel – compelling plots; narrative closure; believable characters; a recognisable fictional world; accessible prose – allow the authors to explore difficult topical issues through the familiar conventions of the middlebrow. Together with the novels’ dialogism, these narrative strategies produce the deep political engagement of the female novel of decolonisation. Conversely, reading the novel of decolonisation through a middlebrow lens illustrates the flexibility of the genre and its ability to transcend the domestic politics, customarily associated with women’s fiction.

Finally, the thesis studies contemporary reviews to gauge the metropolitan reception of the novel of decolonisation. Acting as tastemakers, reviewers are shown to impose a middlebrow aesthetic, revealing a sensitivity to the balance between fact and fiction, and ranking the adherence to certain narrative qualities above overtly political commentary. The female middlebrow, it appears, is expected to wear its politics lightly.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors Alex Tickell and David Johnson for their brilliant guidance and unstinting support. Their expertise and enthusiasm, as well as their frequent reminders to find my own critical voice were instrumental in shaping this thesis. But above all, it has been an absolute pleasure to work with and learn from them. Thank you for being such a fantastic supervisory team.

Within The Open University community, I have benefitted from the support and advice from Joanne Reardon, Tim Reeves, (the late) Claire Seymour, Fiona Doloughan, Edmund King, Jennifer Shepherd, Debbie Parker-Kinch, Edward Hogan, Molly Ziegler, Ursula Rothe and Sara Haslam. Special thanks to my examiners, Shafquat Towheed and Matthew Whittle, and viva chair, Nicola Watson.

Warm thanks too to my fellow Ph.D. students, and especially the English and Creative Writing discussion group for stimulating conversations, friendly critique and companionship.

My research benefitted from significant financial support, in particular from the Open-Oxford-Cambridge (OOC) Doctoral Training Partnership (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council), as well as The Open University Research Training Support grant. I thank Paul Lawrence and Rebecca Costello for the outstanding OOC development and network opportunities.

I would also like to thank the staff at the following libraries and archives for their assistance: The British Library; the Bodleian Library (University of Oxford); Harper & Collins Publishers Archive (Glasgow); the Special Collections at the University of Bristol, the Archive of British Printing and Publishing at the University of Reading; and the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Centre at Boston University.

During my research, it was a privilege to meet with Kim Oliver, Kamala Markandaya's daughter. In recent years, Kim Oliver has been instrumental in realising the re-issue of her mother's books. I thank Kim for sharing memories of her mother's life and for her warm support for my own project.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and interest in my research endeavours. This thesis is dedicated to Barry and the kidults, Pierre, Jean and Felicity. Thank you so much for your love and support, and for not batting an eyelid when I decided I had to do this Ph.D.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Brief overview of the thesis

In September 1954, the British author Elspeth Huxley received a request from Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd for an advance copy of her forthcoming novel, *A Thing to Love*, a fictional account of the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya.<sup>1</sup> Admitting to a busy schedule – Lennox-Boyd was visiting several East African colonies during a period of heightened anti-colonial resistance – his private secretary promised to be most discreet and ‘not to brandish it about in or out of African bookshops.’<sup>2</sup> We don’t know whether Lennox-Boyd got his copy out during the flight. But clearly, one Whitehall official thought that a novel could shed some light on the political situation as the British government considered its next move in the ongoing counterinsurgency campaign.

This thesis examines selected novels by five women writers, published between 1948 and 1972 – the period encompassing the dissolution of the British Empire, the intensification of the Cold War and the domestic tensions following the arrival of thousands of migrants from Britain’s former colonies. The five authors – Cecilie Leslie (1908-1988), Elspeth Huxley (1907-1997), Mary McMinnies (1920-?), Han Suyin (c. 1916/17-2012) and Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) – occupied a unique vantage point, as they witnessed the process of decolonisation at first hand. Drawing on their journalistic backgrounds and their personal experience of empire, they produced narratives which cast a critical eye on Britain’s imperial past and the post-imperial present.<sup>3</sup> My central claim is that women’s novels reveal a much deeper engagement with the politics and economics of decolonisation than is usually ascribed to this fiction. Collectively, their writing undermines the prevalent belief that decolonisation left no imprint on the novel of the immediate post-World-War-Two (‘post-war’) period.<sup>4</sup> It also challenges the view that women writers prioritised their personal memories of empire

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<sup>1</sup> Norah Smallwood, letter to Elspeth Huxley, 24 September 1954.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Jack,’ letter to Norah Smallwood, 27 September 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Often used interchangeably, ‘imperialism’ customarily denotes the establishment of military, political and economic control by one country over another, as well as its underlying ideology, whereas ‘colonialism’ refers to the specific institutions and practices of an imperial power and its people. ‘Post-colonial’ and ‘post-imperial’ are periodising terms, which are useful when discussing authors and their work in a chronological context. The term ‘postcolonial’ is associated with the representation of the relationship between coloniser and colonised, and frequently has a connotation of resistance. I also use the term to denote the newly independent (postcolonial) nation. For a summary of the various terms, see John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (second edition), (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 5-10. For brief summaries of the extensive literature on the ‘postcolonial,’ see Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1-20; McLeod, *Beginning*, pp. 7-43. See also Stuart Hall, ‘When Was “The Post-Colonial”?’ Thinking at the Limit’, in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 242-60.

<sup>4</sup> For useful summaries of the scholarly debate on end-of-empire fiction, see Stuart Ward, ‘Introduction’, in: *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 1-20; Randall Stevenson, *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume 12, 1960-2000: The Last of England?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 484-501; Andrew Hammond, *British Fiction and the Cold War* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 156-68; John McLeod, ‘The Novel and the End of Empire’, in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 7: British and Irish Fiction since 1940*, ed. by Peter Boxall and

and appeared less concerned with the actual politics of decolonisation.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the five authors studied here have received limited scholarly attention, even though at the time of publication, their work was read and reviewed alongside the novels that form the mainstay of end-of-empire literary scholarship.

The thesis further argues that despite the authors' diverse backgrounds and political sensitivities, their writing displays common formal characteristics that are associated with a 'middlebrow' culture and implicitly aim at a metropolitan middle-class reader. I define the middlebrow as the fiction that appeals to a middle-class reading public and is attuned to their aesthetic preferences and social anxieties. The centrality of the middle-class reader (often, though not exclusively, female) invites, first, a historicised reading, which embeds women's middlebrow fiction within the politics of the decolonising world, and second, an exploration of the potential of the middlebrow category or genre to frame a political debate about decolonisation.<sup>6</sup> Recognising the diverse associations of the middlebrow, I conceive of the middlebrow genre as a family of literary texts, similar in some respects, yet different in others.<sup>7</sup> Following Hans Robert Jauss and Tzvetan Todorov, I define genres as 'horizons of expectation' for readers and 'models of writing' for authors, and accordingly view the middlebrow as a social contract between author and reader.<sup>8</sup> I further argue that this relationship often rests on a careful balance between meeting and challenging readers' expectations. Specifically, the middle-class reader expects the middlebrow novel to offer entertainment, as well as a cognitive and emotional education.<sup>9</sup> In response, authors are alert to their readers' expectations, in particular their preference for plot-driven narratives, embedded in a carefully documented and recognisable fictional world, with plausible and engaging characters and a degree of narrative closure. As I aim to demonstrate, the novels' documentary or mimetic quality and their dialogism produce the deep political engagement of the female novel of decolonisation – the thesis's central research question.

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Bryan Cheyette (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 80–93 (pp. 80-82); Matthew Whittle, *Post-War British Literature and the 'End of Empire'* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 8-12.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Phyllis Lassner, *Colonial Strangers: Women Writing the End of the British Empire* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), pp. 8-16; Maroula Joannou, *Women's Writing, Englishness and National and Cultural Identity: The Mobile Woman and the Migrant Voice, 1938-1962* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 134-37.

<sup>6</sup> Elleke Boehmer too advocates a greater focus on the reader, but studies canonical texts of the immediate post-colonial period (Chinua Achebe) and more recent African and South African fiction. Elleke Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-Century Critical Readings* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1-3.

<sup>7</sup> Beth Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 6; John Frow, *Genre* (second edition), (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> 'Horizon of expectation' was coined by Jauss and expanded upon by Todorov. Hans Robert Jauss, 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory', trans. by Elizabeth Benzinger, *New Literary History*, 2:1 (1970), 7–37 (p. 13); Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 18. Jameson defines genre as a social contract. Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) [1981], p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 262; p. 276; Diana Holmes, 'Introduction: European Middlebrow', *Belphegor*, 15:2 (2017), 1-12 (p. 7) <<http://journals.openedition.org/belphegor/942>>; Driscoll, *Literary Middlebrow*, pp. 32-44.

Reading outside the canon and with attention to the narrative strategies of the middlebrow will reveal hitherto under-appreciated tensions between conflicting viewpoints and ideologies, as women writers endorse and contest the dominant political discourse (mediated through mainstream media and official texts). The authors in my thesis interrogate official narratives of orderly withdrawal and successful stewardship; debate neocolonial legacies in the guise of infrastructure investments; challenge the discourse of development; and expose Britain's complicated response to immigration. Their fiction also documents deeper societal tensions in the metropolis, some relating to the twin pressures of decolonisation and immigration, others resulting from disillusion with the unfulfilled promises of the post-war welfare state.

In a further methodological contribution, the thesis studies the reception of the novel of decolonisation, using reviews published in contemporary British newspapers and magazines. Specifically, I ask whether the apathy attributed to the post-war British public in earlier scholarship still stands. I query whether this readership respects the voice of the colonial insider or 'native informant,' familiar from the imperial fiction of earlier decades. This concern with authenticity hails back to an earlier literary tradition, as many imperial novelists endeavoured to educate their British readers. For example, Raj authors such as Flora Annie Steel (1847-1929) and Maud Diver (1867-1945) held the view that they were best placed to provide their metropolitan readers with an accurate picture of India and the Britons serving the empire.<sup>10</sup> Finally, I am interested in understanding how effective the middlebrow is in bridging the gap between author and metropolitan reader, as it aims to address the latter's anxieties about a changing political world.

Covering both the literary end of the spectrum (such as the *Times Literary Supplement (TLS)*, *New Statesman and Nation*, *Time and Tide*) and more mainstream outlets (such as the *Telegraph*, *The Times*, *Daily Mail*), as well as the liberal *Manchester Guardian* and *Observer*, I argue that in the absence of actual reader responses, reviews can be used to illuminate metropolitan literary expectations. Although they may not represent all readers of a given paper or periodical, reviewers act as tastemakers for their audiences, thus providing the researcher with a plausible indicator of reader responses. As we shall see, the reviews convey judgements about authors' narrative choices, praise for the documentary quality of their fiction, as well as reservations about overtly political themes or characters who hold views contrary to the dominant political discourse. Collectively, the reviews therefore hint at the importance of not departing too much from readers' expectations, a recurrent theme in this thesis.

In its chronological organisation and its choice of primary texts, the thesis considers three related aspects of decolonisation. Political decolonisation drives the discussion in Part I, where I examine colonial politics, insurgency and counterinsurgency in *Goat to Kali* (1948) by Cecilie Leslie,

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<sup>10</sup> Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination, 1880-1930* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), p. 98; p. 104; Teresa Hubel, *Whose India? The Independence Struggle in British and Indian Fiction and History* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 46-47.

*A Thing to Love* (1954) by Elspeth Huxley and *The Flying Fox* (1956) by Mary McMinnies. Part II considers the politics and economics of decolonisation during the early years of independence, covering development, Cold War politics and the environment in *The Mountain Is Young* (1958) by Han Suyin and *The Coffey Dams* (1969) by Kamala Markandaya. Part III turns to the domestic consequences of decolonisation, focusing on discourses of crisis, metropolitan disorder and immigration in *A Man from Nowhere* (1964) by Huxley and *The Nowhere Man* (1972) by Markandaya, two novels set in England.

The remainder of this introductory chapter is organised as follows. I first describe the political discourse of decolonisation. Here, I focus on a few overarching themes, leaving more detailed descriptions for the individual chapters. Next, I review the scholarship on end-of-empire fiction, considering first, debates about the imperial legacy, and second, critical views on women's writing. This is followed by an overview of my methodology, notably the concept of the middlebrow and the role of reviewers. Lastly, I introduce the authors and explain the organisation of the thesis.

### **The political discourse of decolonisation**

Historians of empire depict Britain's approach to decolonisation after World War Two as a dynamic and multi-faceted process.<sup>11</sup> Starting with the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, and the withdrawal from Malaya, Singapore and Ghana in 1956-57, the pace of decolonisation accelerated between 1961 and 1966 as political power was handed over in most British colonies in Africa and the West Indies. Yet, the decade after World War Two also saw a renewed focus on empire building, as Britain attempted to strengthen its military and economic presence in Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Thus, the process of decolonisation was uneven, taking different courses at different times and in different geographical areas. Moreover, whilst political decolonisation necessitated a realignment of the formal relationship between the former imperial centre and the colonial periphery, the networks of economic relationships proved more difficult to disentangle, setting the stage for a new form of dependency that would become known as neocolonialism.

Alongside the gradual dismantling of the empire, belief in the imperial ideology – what John Darwin has called the imperial 'habit of mind' – persisted well into the late 1950s.<sup>12</sup> Partaking in a broader discourse of 'imperial idealism,' British politicians firmly believed that they could gradually transform the empire into a Commonwealth of self-governing states, which would not only promote harmonious relationships between Britain and its former colonies, but also allow Britain to continue to

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<sup>11</sup> This section draws on: L. J. Butler, *Britain and Empire: Adjusting to a Post-Imperial World* (London and New York: Tauris Publishers, 2002); John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2012); Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, *Imperial Endgame: Britain's Dirty Wars and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 351.

exert global political influence.<sup>13</sup> Claims to be a world power were irrevocably damaged by the Suez crisis in 1956, exposing Britain's position as a subordinate partner to the United States and revealing divisions within the Commonwealth. Hence, the Suez crisis is widely viewed as the point at which the imperial rhetoric starts losing political and public credibility.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the period, successive governments faced a delicate balancing act, committed to their self-appointed guardian role and steering Britain's colonies towards self-rule, yet secure in their belief that violent insurgencies required military intervention to enable the transition of political leadership. To varying degrees, Labour and Conservative governments were responsive to industrial and financial interests in the colonies, the demands for safeguards from Britons on the ground and the political climate at home.<sup>15</sup> Despite growing ministerial concerns about budgetary pressures, the dominant domestic rhetoric was one of a successful imperial mission achieved, and there was little public resistance to the burden of imperial defence.<sup>16</sup> A decisive shift in the public mood occurred after reports of the 1959 Hola massacre revealed the brutal methods employed by security forces in Kenya.<sup>17</sup> Thereafter, voters would become more sensitive to the use of military force, while popular support for dropping the colonial burden intensified.<sup>18</sup>

Concurrent with efforts to promote the Commonwealth as a partnership of independent nations, the British government also endeavoured to present Western-style democracy as superior to the communist model. The imperial mission was reshaped in response to the polarities of the Cold War environment, whilst to the public at home, fighting anti-colonial insurgencies was presented as a necessary course of action to contain the spread of communism.<sup>19</sup> In a further modification of the 'civilising' mission, foreign aid and investments in large-scale infrastructure projects became key pillars of post-war development policy, grounded in the notion that former colonies should follow the Western example and embrace modernisation in the form of rapid industrialisation and agricultural mechanisation.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, development became entangled with the Cold War discourse and the belief that unless poverty was tackled, 'Third World' countries would succumb to communism.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Butler, pp. 168-69; Hyam, pp. 162-63; p. 173; Nicholas Owen, 'Decolonisation and Postwar Consensus', in *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History: 1945-64*, ed. by Harriet Jones and Michael Kandiah (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1996), pp. 157-81 (p. 158).

<sup>14</sup> Butler, p. 133; Hyam, pp. 239-40.

<sup>15</sup> Darwin, *End of the British Empire*, pp. 17-18; Butler, p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, pp. 168-69; pp. 229-31; Darwin, *End of the British Empire*, pp. 22-23; Butler, pp. 98-101.

<sup>17</sup> Owen, 'Decolonisation', p. 175; Butler, pp. 156-57; Grob-Fitzgibbon, pp. 361-65; Hyam, p. 263.

<sup>18</sup> Darwin, *End of the British Empire*, pp. 23-24; Hyam, pp. 264-65.

<sup>19</sup> Susan L. Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds: British Governments, the Media and Colonial Counter-Insurgency, 1944-1960* (London and New York: Leicester University Press 1995), pp. 11-13; Butler, pp. 168-69; Hyam, p. 138; p. 301.

<sup>20</sup> Cheryl McEwan, *Postcolonialism, Decoloniality and Development* (second edition), (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 120-22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 122-23.

Thus as decolonisation proceeded, the discourses of development and containment came to supersede an older imperial discourse of racial and cultural superiority.

According to Bill Schwarz, by the late 1960s, empire no longer featured in the dominant public discourse – its values were seen as out-dated and unacceptable.<sup>22</sup> Yet memories of empire, and colonial authority in particular, helped shape a new collective discourse of disorder in the old imperial centre.<sup>23</sup> To the extent that empire was associated with white authority and the perceived order it had imposed, withdrawal from empire, combined with increased immigration from the Commonwealth, came to signify disorder and the decline of white authority at home.<sup>24</sup> As such, empire and immigration became intimately linked and long-held prejudices and ideologies persisted beyond the actual dismantling of the empire. At the same time, memories of colonial violence and anti-colonial resistance unsettled this narrative of order, and as Paul Gilroy observes, challenged ‘the country’s instinctive sense that its imperial ambitions were always good, or its political methods for realising them, morally and legally defensible.’<sup>25</sup> Thus memories of empire became distorted, repressed, forgotten, producing what Gilroy terms a condition of ‘postcolonial melancholy’ or the country’s inability to ‘face, never mind actually mourn, the profound changes in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the Empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige.’<sup>26</sup> Reading the middlebrow novel of decolonisation, I will argue in this thesis, takes us back to a place where the end of empire was imagined rather than denied, and the ambiguities of British politics exposed, rather than repressed.

Inspired by Schwarz’s proposal to read the novel of decolonisation ‘at its most centred,’ the thesis situates the novel of decolonisation within the broader domestic political and cultural context, thus allowing synergies between empire and metropolis to come to the fore, whilst creating the conditions for uncovering what he calls ‘the memory traces’ of empire: those private and public memories that permeate post-war British fiction.<sup>27</sup> Schwarz’s ‘programme of disorder’ echoes Frantz Fanon’s description of decolonisation as a ‘programme of complete disorder.’<sup>28</sup> In this mood, seemingly unconnected external developments (the loss of imperial authority) and internal events (immigration, labour strikes, Teddy boys) were conflated into an overall threat to the nation.<sup>29</sup> Such perceptions of disorders may appear in the period’s literary texts as ‘faultlines,’ which as Alan

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<sup>22</sup> Bill Schwarz, *White Man’s World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9; Bill Schwarz, ‘Introduction: End of Empire and the English Novel’, in *End of Empire and the English Novel since 1945*, ed. by Rachael Gilmour and Bill Schwarz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 1-37 (p. 10).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10; Schwarz, *White Man’s World*, pp. 29-32.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press: 2005), p. 93.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>27</sup> Schwarz, ‘Introduction’, p. 3; p. 5; p. 15; Schwarz, *White Man’s World*, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Classics, 2001) [1961], p. 27; Schwarz, ‘Introduction’, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11. Part of 1950s youth culture, Teddy boys (Teds) were involved in violent anti-immigrant clashes. David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: 1957-62* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), pp. 169-70.

Sinfield explains, are the ideological contradictions or tensions in the dominant culture, which are partly hidden in the text, but may emerge as textual anomalies or breakpoints.<sup>30</sup>

Implicitly, the discourse of disorder draws on masculine notions of order. Consequently, as we study women's end-of-empire fiction with a view on exposing the faultlines of post-imperial Britain, we must not only interrogate their engagement with the discourse of disorder and attendant public anxieties, but also ask whether they buy into the concept of the ordered imperial past. Equally, to the extent that the faultlines pertain to deeper societal tensions in the metropolis, we need to be alert to women's expectations and calibrate our reading accordingly.

### **The novel and decolonisation**

Much of the scholarship on British end-of-empire fiction has interrogated a relatively selective canon, studying the works of Anthony Burgess (1917-1993), Graham Greene (1904-1991), Paul Scott (1920-1978) and Doris Lessing (1919-2013). By and large, this research is concerned with the memory and legacy of empire, expressions of loss and nostalgia, as well as the ability of the novel to acknowledge the violence of empire and the racism underpinning the imperial ideology.<sup>31</sup> Earlier scholarship described British fiction of the immediate post-war decades as uninterested in the end of empire (the 'minimal impact' thesis).<sup>32</sup> Other scholars argued that this fiction had become static and inward looking (the 'shrinking island' view), with white Britons writing about (British) class and gender issues, leaving migrant authors to deal with race and immigration.<sup>33</sup> Others yet characterised the prevailing mode in the post-war novel as one of melancholy and a desire to forget the violence that accompanied withdrawal from the empire.<sup>34</sup> According to Susheila Nasta, British post-war writing had not only become 'narrowly parochial [...] but it was still fuelled, even after Independence, by the

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<sup>30</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 9; pp. 46-47. Sinfield draws on Raymond Williams's writing, in particular the notion that dominant, emerging and residual ideas may co-exist in an unstable equilibrium. Therefore, the dominant culture can no longer be characterised as harmonious, and ideological faultlines emerge as various cultural forces interact. Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London and New York: Verso, 1980), pp. 40-42.

<sup>31</sup> See footnote 4 for summaries of this scholarship. See also Margaret Scanlan, *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Michael Gorra, *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Dennis Walder, *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation, and Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Sam Goodman, *The Retrospective Raj: Medicine, Literature and History after Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> The term 'minimal impact' thesis was proposed by Ward ('Introduction', p. 4).

<sup>33</sup> Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 2; p. 8; Whittle, pp. 8-10.

<sup>34</sup> Elleke Boehmer, 'Afterword: The English Novel and the World', in *End of Empire and the English Novel since 1945*, ed. by Rachael Gilmour and Bill Schwarz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 238-43 (p. 239); Hammond, p. 156; p. 163. Related, Walder describes postcolonial nostalgia as both a longing for the past and an opportunity for critical reflection (p. 3; pp. 16-17).

lingering ideologies of a three-hundred-year imperial history.<sup>35</sup> Critics have also highlighted the silences, the mediation of imperial history through the coloniser, and the marginalisation of colonised characters.<sup>36</sup>

More recent scholarship contests these views. In *Post-War British Literature and the 'End of Empire'* (2016), Matthew Whittle highlights the ability of non-canonical authors to challenge what he calls 'unitary narratives of decolonisation.'<sup>37</sup> Whittle shows that the post-war novels of Burgess, William Golding (1911-1993), Gerald Hanley (1916-1992) and Alan Sillitoe (1928-2010) interrogate narrative practices associated with an earlier imperial literature that was in Benita Parry's words 'ideologically saturated,' as it legitimised notions of British racial and cultural superiority.<sup>38</sup> These scholars also draw parallels between the imperial discourse of 'native' savagery and the atrocities committed by Western nations during the Second World War.<sup>39</sup> Whittle further contends that in addition to depicting the dwindling imperial authority, the novels document the uncertainty associated with the uneven progress of decolonisation and Britain's attempts to strengthen its presence throughout its remaining colonies.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Graham MacPhee remarks that George Orwell (1903-1950) and Graham Greene present decolonisation as part of a broader set of geopolitical developments, taking in Britain's renewed commitment to its imperial ambitions after World War Two, as well as Cold War tensions between the superpowers, some of which are played out in former colonial territories.<sup>41</sup>

Often, these themes are rendered obliquely, for example through imagery and metaphors of crisis and disorder.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the novels studied typically foreground the experience (and the appalling behaviour) of Britons on the ground, rather than the actual politics of negotiating Britain's departure and mapping out the political future of the newly independent nation. Whittle, for example, is concerned less with the politics of decolonisation and more with its impact on British identities, and specifically, the emergence of a new multicultural British identity.<sup>43</sup> What also emerges from recent scholarship is that the fiction of this period can usefully be viewed as a transitional literature, as post-war novelists portray a society coming to terms with its imperial past, looking both inwards and outwards.<sup>44</sup> Whittle highlights the residual impact of the imperial ideology, alongside the emergence

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<sup>35</sup> Susheila Nasta, "'Voyaging in': Colonialism and Migration', in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, ed. by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 563-82 (p. 564).

<sup>36</sup> For example, Hammond, pp. 157-59; McLeod, 'The Novel', pp. 83-84.

<sup>37</sup> Whittle, p. 149.

<sup>38</sup> Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 113; Whittle, pp. 25-26.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25; p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>41</sup> Graham MacPhee, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 9; pp. 64-65.

<sup>42</sup> Schwartz, 'Introduction', p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Whittle, pp. 14-15; pp. 109-11; p. 181.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.



of a new national culture that no longer relies on the racial hierarchies of imperialism.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, John McLeod suggests that mid-century writers such as Burgess and Scott start to articulate ‘the beginnings of a “productive shame” in which a shifting, potentially progressive consciousness of empire’s decline is seeded.’<sup>46</sup> This re-appraisal of end-of-empire fiction remains incomplete, however, as the scholarship is almost exclusively focused on texts by male authors, who narrate decolonisation through male protagonists, paying limited attention to women’s fictional accounts of the dismantling of the British Empire and its legacy.

My thesis aims to address this critical gap and argues that as a cultural product of the immediate post-war decades, the female middlebrow novel offers a distinctive account of the politics of decolonisation, demonstrating an ambivalent engagement with the former imperial ideology, a degree of resistance with the dominant discourse of decolonisation and an uneasy encounter with immigration from the former colonies. Foregrounding the political process of decolonisation, I ask whether women writers articulate a more urgent critique of the political rhetoric than implied by the rejection of imperial imagery in the masculine fiction studied by Whittle. I query how women’s fiction captures tensions between competing viewpoints and ideologies; between former colony and imperial centre; between public rhetoric and private sentiment. I also investigate the middlebrow’s take on the period’s dominant economic discourse, both in relation to the post-war welfare state and the economics of development, topics not typically studied in middlebrow scholarship.

Reflecting, first, on their colonial childhoods, and second, their role as partners in the imperial project, some critics suggest that women writers routinely mediate the end of empire through their individual experiences.<sup>47</sup> Yet, imperial women writers, such as Steel, Diver and Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922), had started to express their concerns about the imperial ideology as far back as the late 1890s and early 1900s.<sup>48</sup> Women’s voices grew louder in the interwar period, with Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923), Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978) and Winifred Holtby (1898-1935) questioning the purpose of empire, without, however, challenging its deeper structures.<sup>49</sup> Women writers simultaneously resisted and were complicit with the patriarchal

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15. Whittle couches his study within Williams’s cultural materialist conceptualisation of dominant cultures. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 121-23.

<sup>46</sup> McLeod, ‘The Novel’, p. 82. McLeod also discusses Olivia Manning and J.G. Farrell.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Gillian Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women’s Autobiography* (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), pp. 2-3; pp. 180-82; Patricia M.E. Lorcin, *Historicizing Colonial Nostalgia: European Women’s Narratives of Algeria and Kenya: 1900 – Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 11-12; p. 170; pp. 183-85; Lisa Regan, ‘Women Writing Empire’, in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1920-1945*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 250-63 (pp. 250-51).

<sup>48</sup> For example, Nancy L. Paxton, ‘Complicity and Resistance in the Writings of Flora Annie Steel and Annie Besant’, in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. by Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 158-76; Nancy L. Paxton, *Writing under the Raj: Gender, Race, and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination, 1830-1947* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 193-94; pp. 249-57; Hubel, pp. 46-70.

<sup>49</sup> Regan, pp. 250-51; Jane Garrity, *Stepdaughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 2-3; pp. 15-16.

values supporting the imperial ideology.<sup>50</sup> Simon Gikandi coins the term ‘imperial femininity’ to describe this ambivalence, adding that women’s texts call attention to ‘crucial moments of cultural antagonism in the discourse of empire’ and the way in which alternative viewpoints are being repressed by the hegemonic ideology.<sup>51</sup>

A similar ambivalence can be detected in women’s late imperial fiction, with Rumer Godden (1907-1998), Oliva Manning (1908-1980) and Muriel Spark (1918-2006) anxiously interrogating the legitimacy of empire and their own status as ‘colonial strangers.’<sup>52</sup> Women writers also present critical descriptions of the racist beliefs and attitudes of the European communities in which they grew up.<sup>53</sup> Yet, whilst this fiction is set against a backdrop of political agitation and late-imperial violence, the actual politics of decolonisation are not central to their narratives. Correspondingly, these developments tend not to feature prominently in literary criticism of their work. Instead, the scholarship foregrounds women’s emotional engagement with the approaching end of the empire and what Phyllis Lassner calls the ‘moral frictions’ between their imagined colonial past and the historical reality.<sup>54</sup> Women writers, Lassner suggests, translated their individual experiences into ‘fictions of women’s internalized colonial anxieties and contradictions.’<sup>55</sup>

Memory is at the heart too of the fiction of formerly colonised women, who are writing from a position of exile.<sup>56</sup> English-educated and hailing from well-off families with close connections to the colonial administration – they typify the (post)colonial cosmopolitan elite – these women use the novel to express their personal experience of independence. As an example, the post-Partition novels by Markandaya and Attia Hosain (1913-1998) mourn women’s losses, both their country’s and their personal ones.<sup>57</sup> They also focalise the communal violence before and after Partition through their female protagonists, whilst highlighting the limits to women’s participation in the independence movement. Finally, there is a small corpus of work on the immigrant experience of non-elite women. But whereas the first (Windrush) generation of male writers found a metropolitan audience receptive to their literary accounts of dislocation and racial discrimination, immigrant women such as Buchi

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<sup>50</sup> For example, Warner’s *Mister Fortune’s Maggot* (1927) and Holtby’s *Mandoa, Mandoa!* (1933) employ the ironic mode to critique the imperial project. Traces of imperial violence and emergent anti-colonial resistance can be detected in Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves* (1931), whereas some of Mansfield’s short stories register the violent encounter between white settlers and New Zealand’s indigenous people.

<sup>51</sup> Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 47.

<sup>52</sup> Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9; Joannou, *Women’s Writing*, p. 141; p. 162; p. 168.

<sup>54</sup> Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, p. 6. See also Joannou, *Women’s Writing*, p. 137.

<sup>55</sup> Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Antoinette Burton studies Indian women’s role as keepers of the archive and their use of the home as the site where history is recorded. Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 4-5.

<sup>57</sup> Joannou discusses Kamala Markandaya’s *Some Inner Fury* (1955) and Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) (*Women’s Writing*, pp. 149-60).

Emecheta (1944-2017) and Beryl Gilroy (1924-2001) struggled to find publishers, and their work was not published in London until the 1970s.<sup>58</sup>

In common with earlier imperial fiction, post-war women writers routinely used the trope of the colonial home to represent the threat to imperial stability, or to express their experience of exile and their nostalgia for a lost colonial lifestyle.<sup>59</sup> The critical picture emerging is that women privileged their individual memories and the domestic sphere, as they translated their experiences of political upheaval into literary narratives that dramatise their personal losses and anxieties. In this thesis, I will argue that when we consider a wider range of female authors whose work has been critically neglected, a richer and more complex picture emerges, with the politics and economics of decolonisation at the centre of women's narratives.

### **Defining the middlebrow**

The term 'middlebrow' first appeared in British newspapers in the 1920s and was used throughout the interwar period by commentators and literary critics. It described forms of fiction that were neither 'highbrow' (formally challenging modernist literature), nor 'lowbrow' (popular and mass culture).<sup>60</sup> Its emergence coincided with changes in book publishing and selling, in turn a response to the newly developing reading tastes of the growing middle class, which was more educated, able to afford leisure time and keen to expand their cultural horizons. This readership was fairly eclectic in its choices, consuming a wide range of genres, including detective and crime novels, romances, historical fiction, comic stories, country-house novels and *bildung* narratives. Yet, the interwar middlebrow attracted the condescension and ire from commentators and 'serious' writers, with Woolf dismissing the middlebrow as 'the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence' and Q. D. Leavis deploring the middlebrow's 'taste for the second-rate.'<sup>61</sup> As such, the interwar middlebrow was a heavily mediated category, with publishers, critics and authors working together to help shape readers' tastes.<sup>62</sup> It is important to note though that the middlebrow is a critical concept, employed by contemporary

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<sup>58</sup> Sandra Courtman, 'The Transcultural Tryst in Migration, Exile and Diaspora', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1945-1975*, ed. by Clare Hanson and Susan Watkins (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 192-209 (p. 198).

<sup>59</sup> For example, Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, 'Introduction: Being at Home with the Empire', in *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, ed. by Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1-31 (pp. 24-27); Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 2-3; Susan Watkins, 'Going "Home": Exile and Nostalgia in the Writing of Doris Lessing', in *Women's Writing, 1945-1960: After the Deluge*, ed. by Jane Dowson (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 191-204 (pp. 191-92).

<sup>60</sup> For example, Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 11-12; David Carter, 'Middlebrow Book Culture', in *Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Art and Culture*, ed. by Laurie Hanquinet and Mike Savage (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 351-66 (p. 352).

<sup>61</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Middlebrow: Unpublished Letter to the Editor of the *New Statesman*', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Readers Union, 1943), p. 115; Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965) [1932], p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, pp. 36-38; Driscoll, *Literary Middlebrow*, pp. 23-29.

reviewers and modern scholars. There is no middlebrow school or movement as such, and few authors would have applied the label to their own writing.<sup>63</sup>

In its conceptualisation of the middlebrow as a marker of cultural capital and taste, the scholarship has been influenced by the seminal work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, the middlebrow brings together the minor works of the major arts and the major works of the minor arts.<sup>64</sup> As such, it is defined in relation to what he calls legitimate culture and this constitutes its main attraction for its middle-class consumers, as it combines accessibility and cultural legitimacy.<sup>65</sup> The middlebrow scholar Nicola Humble defines the middlebrow as ‘an essentially parasitical form, dependent on the existence of both a high and a lowbrow for its identity [...] holding its skirts away from lowbrow contamination, and gleefully mocking highbrow intellectual pretensions.’<sup>66</sup> In the past two decades, scholars have moved away from the static and pejorative use of the term as a literary category stuck ‘betwixt and between’ high and lowbrow writing, and embroiled in a debate about class and cultural taste.<sup>67</sup> Instead, they have come to view the middlebrow as a genre or category in its own right, defined both by the relationship with its readership, and by the common thematic and narrative characteristics that reflect the tastes and concerns of these readers.<sup>68</sup> Scholars also contest the notion of a fixed genre defined in terms of its (unchanging) reception, viewing the middlebrow as a contingent category into which texts move at certain moments in their social history.<sup>69</sup>

Whilst most critics have studied the middlebrow novel of the interwar years, some employ the concept in the post-war context. In America, Janice Radway applies the term to Book-of-the-Month selections in the 1950s and 1960s, whilst Christina Klein examines a range of cultural texts of the late 1940s and 1950s, which introduced Asia and the Pacific to the American reader.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile Tom Perrin locates the 1950s middlebrow novel within a longer tradition of American realist writing and points to its use of shared formal strategies in order to define itself against a hegemonic modernist

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<sup>63</sup> Nicola Humble, ‘The Feminine Middlebrow Novel’, in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920-1945*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 97-111 (p. 97).

<sup>64</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge, 2010) [1984], p. 8; pp. 321-28. See also Driscoll, *Literary Middlebrow*, pp. 12-17.

<sup>65</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 321.

<sup>66</sup> Woolf, ‘Middlebrow’, p. 115; Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>67</sup> The pejorative meaning persists with the Oxford English Dictionary defining the middlebrow as: ‘A person who is only moderately intellectual or who has average or limited cultural interests (sometimes with the implication of pretensions to more than this); a thing regarded as intellectually unchallenging or of limited intellectual or cultural value.’ ‘Middlebrow, n. & adj.’, *The Oxford English Dictionary* <<https://www-oed-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/view/Entry/252048?redirectedFrom=middlebrow#eid>>.

<sup>68</sup> For example, Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch, ‘Introduction: The Middlebrow – Within or Without Modernism’, *Modernist Cultures*, 6:1 (2011), 1-17 (p. 2); Humble, ‘Feminine Middlebrow’, p. 97.

<sup>69</sup> Nicola Humble, ‘Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading’, *Modernist Culture*, 6:1 (2011), 41-59 (p. 42).

<sup>70</sup> Radway, p. 5; Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: Berkeley California Press, 2003), pp. 7-8.

culture.<sup>71</sup> Erica Brown studies British female middlebrow novels and claims that the tension between high and middlebrow fiction is most marked in the immediate post-World-War-Two period.<sup>72</sup> Others yet apply the concept to the study of twenty-first-century culture. Beth Driscoll focuses on the institutions supporting middlebrow fiction in Britain, whilst Diana Holmes examines French crime fiction and comics, both convincingly making the case for the continuing relevance of the middlebrow in debates on the commercial and cultural roles of the novel, but also urging us to use the term in a flexible manner, so we can account for its diverse manifestations.<sup>73</sup>

In the settler colonies, the middlebrow was employed in the service of a new national agenda. Studying Australian middlebrow of the 1930s and 1940s, David Carter finds evidence of a distinct ‘national middlebrow,’ committed to the diffusion of a national culture.<sup>74</sup> Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith examine Canadian middlebrow periodicals published between 1925 and 1960. In common with Carter, they emphasise the middlebrow’s ambition to combine education and entertainment within a nationalist frame.<sup>75</sup> Finally, Chris Bongie takes the concept of the middlebrow to the writing of formerly colonised authors. Bongie proposes the term ‘postcolonial middlebrow’ to describe modern Caribbean fiction, which ‘packag[es] the postcolonial and the mainstream together,’ thereby creating texts where the “‘high serious” and/or “resistant nature”” of the postcolonial intersect with the popular.<sup>76</sup>

Taken together, this scholarship has produced valuable insights into the middlebrow, noting its diversity, flexibility and historical contingency, as well as the porous and shifting boundaries between the various literary categories. This versatility is apparent too when studying the discipline’s main area of focus: the female middlebrow.

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<sup>71</sup> Tom Perrin, *The Aesthetics of Middlebrow Fiction: Popular US Novels, Modernism, and Form, 1945-75* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Erica Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel: Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor* (London and Brookfield: Pickering and Chatto, 2013), pp. 11-12. Brown further remarks that the post-war middlebrow no longer defined itself in opposition to the modernist novel, but rather against the fiction of a new generation of (male) novelists, who did not appreciate the ‘wit, irony, subtlety and sophistication’ of female middlebrow novelists such as Elizabeth Taylor or Rosamond Lehmann (pp. 116-18).

<sup>73</sup> Driscoll, *Literary Middlebrow*, pp. 25-29; Diana Holmes, ‘The Way We Read Now: Middlebrow Fiction in Twenty-First Century Europe’, *CALL: Irish Journal for Culture, Arts, Literature and Language*, 2:1 (2017), 1-21 (pp. 3-5). Driscoll examines Oprah’s Book Club, the Man Booker Prize and literary festivals. In recent years, the postmodernist concept of the ‘nobrow’ has emerged to denote the deliberate blurring of boundaries between high and low culture. See Beth Driscoll, ‘Middlebrow and Nobrow: Tracing Patterns across Culture’, in *When Highbrow Meets Lowbrow: Popular Culture and the Rise of Nobrow*, ed. by Peter Swirski and Tero Eljas Vanhanen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 53-79.

<sup>74</sup> David Carter, ‘The Mystery of the Missing Middlebrow or the C(o)urse of Good Taste’, in *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World*, ed. by Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 173-201.

<sup>75</sup> Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith, *Magazines, Travel, and Middlebrow Culture: Canadian Periodicals in English and French, 1925-1960* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 14.

<sup>76</sup> Chris Bongie, *Friends and Enemies: The Scribal Politics of Post/Colonial Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), p. 295; p. 302. See also Belinda Edmondson on the tensions between local middlebrow and expatriate highbrow fiction. Belinda Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure Culture and the Middle Class* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), pp. 3-6.

## The female middlebrow and the political middlebrow

Middlebrow fiction is typically connected with issues of particular concern to women's lives. Historically, this explains the critical disdain for the form, as literary merit became associated with men's writing (and a select set of female writers such as Woolf and Mansfield), and femininity and domesticity with the devalued middlebrow form.<sup>77</sup> But this gendered association also reflects the efforts of middlebrow scholars who have focused their attention on neglected women writers and the gender and class issues explored in this fiction. Many English middlebrow novels studied in this scholarship have a domestic theme, featuring middle-class families, their homes, leisure and social relationships, and registering women's anxieties about changing class and gender identities.<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, while some critics believe that the female middlebrow endorses a conservative ideology, others are keen to emphasise its subversive potential.<sup>79</sup> For example, Alison Light suggests that although their interest in family and domesticity could be viewed as conservative, interwar women writers engaged with the ongoing process of modernisation. As such, their fiction looked backwards and forwards, a stance she labels conservative modernism, and which is both a revolt against the past and an attempt to make room for the present.<sup>80</sup> Others argue that the middlebrow's intense interest in the home and the minutiae of daily life – 'the tyranny of tea' – frequently revealed women's frustrations with the constraints domesticity imposed on them.<sup>81</sup> Humble concludes that female middlebrow fiction '[f]ar from being the cosy, smug literature caricatured by its detractors, [it] is highly subtle and flexible, continually negotiating changing social structures and ideologies, balancing conservatism and radicalisms.'<sup>82</sup> For Brown, the female middlebrow novel offers its readers 'delightful entertainment,' yet also reveals the disappointments and cruelty of domesticity and married life, while Hammill remarks that female middlebrow texts subvert the values supporting middle-class ideology, including marriage and motherhood.<sup>83</sup> These scholars also point to the middlebrow's relationship with its implied female reader, with Brown noting that its authors are intent on creating an exclusive community of female readers.<sup>84</sup> In this regard, Lauren Berlant's concept of

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<sup>77</sup> Erica Brown and Mary Grover, 'Introduction: Middlebrow Matters', in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960*, ed. by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 1-21 (p. 10); Driscoll, *Literary Middlebrow*, p. 29; Humble, 'Feminine Middlebrow', p. 101.

<sup>78</sup> For example, Jane Dowson, 'Introduction', in *Women's Writing 1945-1960: After the Deluge*, ed. by Jane Dowson (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 1-14 (pp. 3-8); Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, *Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel, and E. H. Young* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 1-4; p. 11.

<sup>79</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 10-11.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>81</sup> Briganti and Mezei, p. 1. See also Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, p. 5; pp. 255-56; Hilary Hinds, 'Ordinary Disappointments: Femininity, Domesticity, and Nation in British Middlebrow Fiction, 1920-1944', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 55:2 (2009), 293-320.

<sup>82</sup> Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, p. 256.

<sup>83</sup> Brown, p. 1; p. 15; p. 27; Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> Brown, p. 9.

the ‘intimate public space’ – the affective space where shared consumption of cultural products creates an experience of social belonging, a place of recognition and reflection – is relevant too.<sup>85</sup> Finally, and in a direct rebuttal to its earlier detractors – Q. D. Leavis likened women’s reading to ‘a form of the drug habit,’ condemning its escapist nature – the middlebrow reader is imagined as intelligent and attentive, yet fully intent on enjoying her escape into the fictional world.<sup>86</sup>

While insightful, this gender-based reading of the middlebrow has some drawbacks. First, it overlooks the fact that the middlebrow novel addresses male anxieties too, in some cases dealing with the fall-out from two World Wars, in others with newly defined middle-class aspirations and role models.<sup>87</sup> Second, and more pertinent to this thesis, it downplays the political content of the female middlebrow, as it reduces the novel’s politics to a discussion about middle-class gender anxieties. Yet, as I explain next, women writers were part of a political middlebrow tradition, dating back to the interwar period.

Some women writers of the interwar period were keenly aware of the potential of the middlebrow novel to communicate their political ideals and inform their readers. As Kristin Ewins has shown, Holtby, Storm Jameson (1891-1986) and Lettice Cooper (1897-1994) developed dual romantic and political plots with independent and politically engaged female protagonists.<sup>88</sup> Their work challenged conventional domestic values, and at the same time conveyed the authors’ socialist policies in a form acceptable to their middle-class readers.<sup>89</sup> Partly in reaction against Woolf’s modernist writing, they aimed for entertaining stories, written in accessible prose and producing documentary-style descriptions of the social reality.<sup>90</sup>

Whereas Jameson, Cooper and Holtby adopted the conventions of the female middlebrow to explore their political ideas, their male colleagues, such as Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), H. G. Wells (1866-1946), J. B. Priestley (1894-1984) and Orwell, represent a masculine middlebrow tradition, which combines an interest in the suburban lives of their male middle-class readers with a commitment to social and political criticism. Anna Vaninskaya coins the term ‘political middlebrow’

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<sup>85</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. viii; pp. 4-5.

<sup>86</sup> Leavis, p. 7; Humble, ‘Sitting’, pp. 50-51; Brown, pp. 8-9.

<sup>87</sup> Kate Macdonald, ‘Introduction: Identifying the Middlebrow, the Masculine and Mr Miniver’, in *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr Miniver Read*, ed. by Kate Macdonald (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1-23 (pp. 11-17).

<sup>88</sup> Kristin Ewins, ‘“The Better It Is Written the Worse It Is”: Storm Jameson on Popular Fiction and the Political Novel’, *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism*, 7 (2009), 92-109 (p. 105); Kristin Ewins, ‘“Revolutionizing a Mode of Life”: Leftist Middlebrow Fiction by Women in the 1930s’, *English Literary History*, 82:1 (2015), 251-79. Holtby’s *South Riding* (1936) depicts local politics; Jameson and Cooper fictionalise industrial strikes, the former in her 1930s *The Mirror in Darkness* trilogy, the latter in *National Provincial* (1938).

<sup>89</sup> Ewins, ‘The Better’, p. 105; Ewins, ‘Revolutionizing’, p. 254; p. 274; Kristin Ewins, ‘Professional Women Writers’, in *A History of 1930s British Literature*, ed. by Benjamin Kohlmann and Matthew Taunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2019), pp. 58-71 (p. 61).

<sup>90</sup> Ewins, ‘Revolutionizing’, p. 265; p. 267.

to describe their work: ‘big human documents [...] dealing with the major social issues of the time.’<sup>91</sup> Often straddling fiction and non-fiction, its mode of writing is characterised as a ‘marriage of art and politics,’ conveying a political agenda, a polemic, which appeals to middle-class readers.<sup>92</sup>

As I argue in this thesis, the novel of decolonisation continues in the tradition of the interwar political middlebrow, male and female. In common with the earlier generation, the authors in my study combine extensive on-the-ground research with their personal experience of empire, drawing on their own journalistic output, as well as official communications and media reports. Commenting on journalist-writers’ professional commitment to fact-based reporting and accessible writing, Doug Underwood remarks that their fiction derives some of its narrative power from its documentary quality, for example through the development of realistic plots or the insertion of actual events and people.<sup>93</sup> Underwood draws on the work of the literary theorist Barbara Foley, who defines the documentary novel as situated on the border between fact and fiction, without, however, attempting to eradicate this border.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, journalist-writers frequently refrain from attributing causality and instead offer multiple interpretations or avoid closure, thus inviting the reader to reach their own conclusions.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, many are attracted to the fictional form, with its potential for vividly imagined stories and richly drawn characters, which can generate a more empathetic response from their audiences than non-fiction.<sup>96</sup>

In the gendered scholarly field of the female middlebrow, women’s political fiction has received relatively limited attention. Equally overlooked is women writers’ own interrogation of the relationship between politics and literary form within the context of the middlebrow novel. As shown by Ewins, interwar novelists such as Holtby and Jameson had a keen interest in debating the formal requirements of politically engaged writing, and these were not to be found in modernist, experimental fiction.<sup>97</sup> Rather, Holtby and Jameson argued for a politicised middlebrow, attentive to the materialities of everyday life and invested in real-life characters.<sup>98</sup> Similar pre-occupations feature in modern scholarship on the middlebrow’s narrative strategies, as we shall see next.

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<sup>91</sup> Anna Vaninskaya, ‘The Political Middlebrow from Chesterton to Orwell’, in *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr Miniver Read*, ed. by Kate Macdonald (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 162-76 (p. 164).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165; p. 175.

<sup>93</sup> Doug Underwood, *Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 3-4; Doug Underwood, *The Undeclared War between Journalism and Fiction: Journalists as Genre Benders in Literary History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 2-3.

<sup>94</sup> Underwood, *Journalism*, p. 136; Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 25.

<sup>95</sup> Underwood, *Undeclared War*, p. 24; pp. 41-42.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-83; Underwood, *Journalism*, pp. 139-42. Underwood further argues that many journalists believed that fiction gave them the freedom to write about political and social issues, whereas newspaper or magazine editors would impose editorial constraints (*Undeclared War*, p. 25).

<sup>97</sup> Ewins, ‘The Better’, p. 96; Ewins, ‘Revolutionizing’, p. 259; pp. 265-67.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*



## Narrative strategies of the middlebrow

Some scholars apply the label ‘middlebrow’ to describe late Victorian and Edwardian realist fiction.<sup>99</sup> The assigned middlebrow status refers to the novels’ middle-class readership as well as their formal conservatism, said to help contain late nineteenth-century anxieties about gender, class and empire.<sup>100</sup> While acknowledging the literary antecedents of the novel of decolonisation, this thesis’s primary interest is in the shared narrative characteristics that together point to a distinct post-war middlebrow aesthetic.

In the first instance, the middlebrow is mimetic. It conjures a world that can be recognised by its readers, even as it takes them beyond their immediate and lived experience.<sup>101</sup> Mimesis also permits sympathetic identification with believable characters, drawn with greater precision than the stock figures of popular fiction.<sup>102</sup> By situating its subject in a familiar external context, mimesis may encourage the reader to view the real world in a different light and revisit existing ideas and beliefs.<sup>103</sup> As such, mimesis contributes to the middlebrow’s didactic function, promoting both cognitive and emotional learning. In a related way, the middlebrow is intertextual, operating through self-conscious allusion to works of fiction its middle-class reader may have read and enjoyed.<sup>104</sup> Key attributes of the social contract between author and reader, mimesis and intertextuality often work together, offering the reader a recognisable social and cultural context, whilst presuming a shared frame of reference.<sup>105</sup>

Second, the middlebrow novel is plot-based, inviting the reader to live through an interesting and largely unpredictable sequence of events, albeit within the reassuringly familiar context created by mimesis and intertextuality. As the reader experiences the uncertainties of the unfolding plot, s/he temporarily leaves behind the comfort of the known and ordered world, to be immersed in an unknown and contingent alternative reality.<sup>106</sup> Through this dynamic interaction between the known and the unknown – what narratologist Raphael Baroni calls the narrative tension – the fictional text

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<sup>99</sup> Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter, ‘Introduction: “...All Granite, Fog and Female Fiction”’, in *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945* ed. by Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter (Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016), pp. 1-17 (pp. 2-3). Kate Macdonald and Christoph Singer, ‘Introduction: Transitions and Cultural Formations’, in *Transitions in Middlebrow Writing, 1880 – 1930*, ed. by Kate Macdonald and Christoph Singer (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 1-13 (pp. 2-3); Jennifer Shepherd, ‘Marketing Middlebrow Feminism: Elizabeth von Arnim, the New Woman and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Book Market’, *Philological Quarterly*, 84:1 (2005), 105-31 (p. 111); Samuel James Caddick, *The Construction of Anglo-Indian Spaces in Middlebrow Works of Raj Fiction, 1880-1914* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Liverpool John Moores University, 2019), p. 7; p. 33.

<sup>100</sup> Ehland and Wächter, p. 3; Caddick, p. 35; p. 41.

<sup>101</sup> Holmes, ‘Introduction’, pp. 5-6; Holmes, ‘The Way’, pp. 7-8.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6; p. 11.

<sup>103</sup> Holmes, ‘Introduction’, p. 4; Holmes, ‘The Way’, p. 8; Diana Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters: Women’s Reading and the Literary Canon in France since the Belle Époque* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), pp. 15-18.

<sup>104</sup> Holmes, ‘The Way’, p. 11.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* This shared frame of reference is reminiscent of Bourdieu’s *habitus*, defined as ‘schemes of perception, appreciation and action’ that guide consumers’ taste and choices (*Distinction*, p. 94). See also Radway, pp. 388-89.

<sup>106</sup> Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters*, pp. 23-24; Raphaël Baroni, *La Tension Narrative: Suspense, Curiosité et Surprise* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007), p. 35. All translations are my own.

may assist the reader in confronting the uncertainties of daily life.<sup>107</sup> Plot-based novels, Baroni observes, ‘take charge’ by creating order and meaning.<sup>108</sup>

Third, the middlebrow responds to the reader’s desire for resolution, by constructing narratives that move forward and carry the reader along through plot and suspense, and through empathy with its imaginary characters.<sup>109</sup> Closure, or the resolution of conflict and uncertainty within the narrative, is critical to the reader’s experience, because s/he can fully enjoy the narrative tension (the thrill of the plot, the gradual discovery of the truth), in the secure knowledge that some order will prevail. Against modernism’s disdain of plot and its pervasive pessimism, middlebrow fiction offers pleasingly coherent plots, as well as a dose of optimism, whether through a satisfying conclusion to the plot, or the knowledge that its main protagonists have found some form of fulfilment.<sup>110</sup> At other times though, middlebrow endings are ambiguous, suggesting either that full resolution (the happy ending of popular fiction) does not exist, or that the promise of narrative resolution is untenable.<sup>111</sup>

A key aim of this thesis is to locate the novel of decolonisation within the broader middlebrow family. As we shall see, the seven novels in my thesis offer compelling plots, vivid characters, a fictional world grounded in reality, and a degree of narrative closure. Recalling the centrality of character in the political middlebrow, I will also make the case for giving greater prominence to the role of narrative voice. Specifically, I will argue that Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism provides a productive framework for reading the novel of decolonisation. Bakhtin’s insight that the polyphonic (or multi-voiced) novel presents a world where multiple viewpoints co-exist and compete, and where individual discourse is itself dialogic, containing ‘two voices, two meanings and two expressions,’ aptly characterises the middlebrow novel.<sup>112</sup> Few middlebrow scholars make this link, even though some have an interest in the use of voice as a narrative device. For example, Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei observe that interwar domestic novels employ a range of narrative techniques, including shifting focalisations, free indirect discourse, interior monologue, ‘acerbic modern dialogue’ and irony to create a ‘discourse of opposition.’<sup>113</sup> Similarly, Perrin remarks that narrative voice plays a vital role in generating the middlebrow’s tensions and ambiguities, with the use of multiple voices, free indirect discourse and unreliable narrators capturing the perceived threats to post-war cultural cohesion.<sup>114</sup> In making explicit the link with Bakhtin’s double-voiced discourse,

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<sup>107</sup> Baroni defines narrative tension as ‘the phenomenon that occurs when the interpreter of a story is encouraged to wait for a resolution’ (p. 18).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 409.

<sup>109</sup> Holmes, ‘Introduction’, pp. 7-8; Perrin, p. 43.

<sup>110</sup> Holmes, ‘Introduction’, pp. 7-8; Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters*, p. 10; p. 13; p. 25.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 13; Perrin, pp. 106-07; pp. 137-38.

<sup>112</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 324. Also, p. 282; pp. 314-15; p. 325.

<sup>113</sup> Briganti and Mezei, p. 7; pp. 32-33.

<sup>114</sup> Perrin, p. 3; p. 136.

my thesis proposes a framework for reading the female novel of decolonisation, and the political middlebrow more generally, which does full justice to their deep political engagement.

Continuing this exploration of the middlebrow's dialogism, the thesis also draws attention to the role of secondary characters. Despite occupying a relatively minor role in the narrative, they are part of what Alex Woloch terms the novel's character-space and bring specific political, moral or ideological conflicts to the fore.<sup>115</sup> Secondary characters perform a comparable narrative function in the middlebrow novels studied in this thesis, as they give voice to the contradictions inherent in the discourse of decolonisation. Typically representing a range of political viewpoints, they challenge the central (British) protagonist, undermine the official British discourse, or expose divergent views within anti-colonial movements. As such, they too contribute to the Bakhtinian struggle between different worldviews.

A distinguishing formal characteristic of the female middlebrow is its recourse to the comic mode as a further example of Bakhtinian double-voiced discourse. As theorised by Bakhtin, comedy – and irony in particular – reveals the weaknesses of one voice amidst other, competing voices.<sup>116</sup> Building on this work, the feminist critic Judy Little argues that dialogic comedy allows women writers to expose the ideologies of (masculine) authority and the ambivalent structures of language underpinning them.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, Brown suggests that the female middlebrow employs comedy and irony to communicate with a community of attentive readers, who understand their operation and are likely to recognise the text as a subversive commentary.<sup>118</sup> While these scholars formulate their arguments with reference to gender discourse, here I examine women's use of comedy to contest the official discourse of decolonisation.

By and large, the middlebrow aims to meet the preferences, aspirations and anxieties of its middle-class readers. This relationship explains its central objective to offer the reader enjoyment and instruction; its efforts to create a reassuringly familiar fictional world; and its attentiveness to topical political and social issues of interest to the readership. However, the middlebrow can also upset readers' expectations when it departs from established narrative conventions and introduces unresolved plots, unreliable narrators or unexpected variants on familiar intertexts. Building on these insights, my thesis aims to illustrate the complexities women writers encounter when narrating the politics and economics of decolonisation, and which they attempt to resolve (not always successfully) through recourse to the narrative conventions of the middlebrow.

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<sup>115</sup> Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 13-14; pp. 40-42.

<sup>116</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 311-12; pp. 323-25.

<sup>117</sup> Judy Little, 'Humoring the Sentence: Women's Dialogic Comedy', in *Women's Comic Visions*, ed. by June Sochen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 19-32 (p. 20; p. 31). See also Sophie Blanch, 'Women and Comedy', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920-1945*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 112-28 (p. 114).

<sup>118</sup> Brown, pp. 2-3; pp. 19-20. See also Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 4; p. 6.

## The metropolitan reader and the middlebrow

If the middlebrow is defined in relation to its middle-class readers, conversely its reception can be used to gauge those readers' attitudes towards its principal themes and controversies. Recognising this central relationship, the thesis studies contemporary reviews published in British newspapers and magazines as an indicator of the metropolitan response to the middlebrow's engagement with the politics and economics of decolonisation.

Reviewers reflect and shape readers' attitudes towards newly published fiction. During the interwar years, Bennett and Priestley championed middlebrow fiction in their role as literary editors for the *Evening Standard*.<sup>119</sup> Acting as 'tastemakers,' they and their fellow reviewers, such as Holtby and Wells, praised middlebrow novels which combined accessibility with a commitment to serious contemporary issues.<sup>120</sup> Covering the spectrum of British newspapers and magazines, their critical interventions helped promote a conservative middlebrow aesthetic, but met with derision by critics such as Leavis who accused the press of lowering literary standards.<sup>121</sup>

Two decades later, a similar debate played out amongst authors and reviewers. Writing in the November 1956 issue of the literary magazine *Books and Bookmen*, the novelist and critic Elizabeth Berridge wittily defined the middlebrow as offering 'a good story, an acceptable moral approach, a satisfactory ending: all preferably bound together by several good handfuls of mud.'<sup>122</sup> Kingsley Amis described his own work in similar, albeit more prosaic terms – 'believable stories about understandable characters in a reasonably straightforward style' – without, however, employing the term 'middlebrow.'<sup>123</sup>

Berridge and Amis articulated views on the nature of the novel that were debated in literary circles and appear too in mainstream newspapers of the period. For some, the middlebrow is unambiguously negative, a mediocre form of art aimed at a mediocre public. The middlebrow is 'decent,' 'solid,' 'colourless;' its reader non-discerning and lacking intellectual sophistication.<sup>124</sup> One *Telegraph* critic described the middlebrow as 'art which asks few questions, breaks no new ground

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<sup>119</sup> Adrian Bingham, 'Cultural Hierarchies and the Interwar British Press', in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960*, ed. by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 55-68 (p. 58).

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59; pp. 64-65. See also John Baxendale and Christopher Pawling, *Narrating the Thirties: A Decade in the Making: 1930s to the Present* (Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan, 1996), p. 55. On women's role as critical reviewers of middlebrow fiction, see Catherine Clay, 'The Woman Journalist, 1920-1945', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920-1945*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 199-214 (pp. 207-08).

<sup>121</sup> Bingham, p. 61; p. 64; Leavis, p. 171; pp.183-85.

<sup>122</sup> Elizabeth Berridge, 'Is There a Chill Wind Blowing Through the Literary Palm Courts?', *Books and Bookmen*, November 1956, p. 11.

<sup>123</sup> Quoted in Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>124</sup> Hilary Corke, 'New Novels', *Listener*, 20 March 1958, p. 512; [Anon.], 'Other Selected Crime', *TLS*, 8 April 1965, p. 280; Alan Ross, 'Danger Spots', *TLS*, 15 October 1954, p. 653; T. R. Fyvel, 'Britain: A Second-Rank Literary Power?', *Listener*, 16 May 1963, p. 834; Cyril Connolly, 'A Matter of Mind: Intellectuals, Artists & Middlebrows', *Sunday Times*, 23 August 1959, p. 12.

and satisfies the unadventurous as it is well within established taste barriers.’<sup>125</sup> Others emphasised its familiarity and likeability. ‘The middlebrow novel (or film or play) consoles you, cheers you up,’ the *Sunday Times* asserted.<sup>126</sup> Likewise, the author and critic Cyril Connolly commented on the middlebrow’s ‘genial commonsense and polite optimism.’<sup>127</sup> Meanwhile, the *Telegraph* theatre critic W. A. Darlington wrote appreciatively of the middlebrow’s commitment to plot: ‘well-told stories with beginnings and middles and ends, and interesting characters.’<sup>128</sup> This attracts the intelligent middlebrow, he argued, whose tastes are ‘not intellectual, but there is, humanly speaking, no limit to his intelligence.’<sup>129</sup> Other commentators praised the middlebrow’s ‘documentary truthfulness’ and its didactic aims, as well as its accessible prose.<sup>130</sup> More ambiguous was reviewers’ stance on the middlebrow’s perceived reaction to the modernism of the interwar period, typically connected with Woolf. Reviewers contrasted the esoteric and inward focus of modernist art – and latterly the French *nouveau roman* – with the middlebrow’s interest in the external, real world, even though as the novelist Angus Wilson lamented in the *Listener*, ‘we may find ourselves forgetting that we are in the realm of art at all.’<sup>131</sup>

Despite the lack of consensus on what constitutes the middlebrow, the term itself does not lose currency in the immediate post-war decades. Some commentators believed the middlebrow to be a valuable category – in 1955, Philip Toynbee opined that there was no other term which brought the same clarity – whereas others were of the view that distinctions between ‘the brows’ no longer mattered.<sup>132</sup> Others yet, as in the case of Amis, found no use for the term. Perhaps surprisingly, the term rarely appears in the academic literature of the period, even though literary scholars participated in a not dissimilar conversation on the function and formal characteristics of the novel. This debate coalesced around the continued appeal of formal realist conventions and the (in)ability of the realist novel to represent ‘real life.’<sup>133</sup> Modernism was attacked for its obsession with subjectivity and its lack of interest in the external world and pressing social questions.<sup>134</sup> Conversely, the realist mode was described as the ‘main road’ for novelists to take, after the temporary diversion caused by

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<sup>125</sup> Leslie Waddington, ‘Why Artists Go Hungry’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 30 July 1967, p. 11.

<sup>126</sup> [Anon.], ‘The Sunday Times Guide to the Modern Movement in the Arts’, *Sunday Times*, 14 May 1967, p. 54.

<sup>127</sup> Cyril Connolly, ‘Neuroses All the Way’, *Sunday Times*, 9 October 1955, p. 5.

<sup>128</sup> W. A. Darlington, ‘Where Angels Fear to Tread’, *Daily Telegraph*, 4 October 1964, p. 19.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> George Fraser, ‘Whose Criterion?’, in *TLS*, 8 January 1960, p. 20; Frederick Laws, ‘Other New Novels’, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 February 1960, p. 17.

<sup>131</sup> Angus Wilson, ‘Broken Promise’, *Listener*, 12 April 1951, pp. 575-76 (p. 575). See also Angus Wilson, ‘Sense and Sensibility in Recent Writing’, *Listener*, 24 August 1950, pp. 279-80; Fraser, p. 20.

<sup>132</sup> Philip Toynbee, ‘Middlebrow’, *Observer*, 11 September 1955, p. 11; Fraser, p. 20.

<sup>133</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel*, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1971), pp. 13-14; Gasiorek, pp. 1-8; Nick Bentley, *Radical Fictions: The English Novel in the 1950s* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 32-33.

<sup>134</sup> Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel: 1950-1960* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 2-11; Bergonzi, *Situation*, p. 65; Gasiorek, p. 3; p. 23.

modernist experimentalism.<sup>135</sup> Hence, when these scholars discussed the relevance of the middlebrow, they replicated a debate that occupied earlier critics and authors.

### About the authors

Despite their different backgrounds and political sensitivities, the five writers in my study share a commitment to debating the politics and economics of decolonisation through their fiction. Cecilie Leslie wrote *Goat to Kali* shortly after India's independence. Born in a family with long-standing connections to the indigo industry in Bihar (also known as Behar), she was educated in England and France, and worked as a journalist and short story writer. Leslie returned in 1940 to take up a post in the colonial government of India, as associate editor of *Indian Information*, an official wartime publication.<sup>136</sup> She wrote three further novels drawing on her knowledge of the region, namely *The Blue Devils* (1951), *The Rope Bridge* (1964) and *The Golden Stairs* (1968).

Elspeth Huxley spent her childhood in Kenya (then known as British East Africa) where her parents Nellie and Jos Grant had settled in 1912 to build a farm and grow coffee. Although Huxley left Kenya at eighteen to attend university in England and the United States, she frequently returned for extended stays, visiting family and friends, and travelling across the continent to gather information for her various writing projects. She became known first with her 1935 biography of Lord Delamere, one of the early British settlers, and found international fame with her fictional childhood memoirs *The Flame Trees of Thika* (1959) and *The Mottled Lizard* (1962).

Mary McMinnies was born in India and educated in England and Germany. Towards the end of the Second World War, she worked on the staff of the British Commission in Vienna. Married to a British Foreign Office official, she lived in Beirut, Athens, Warsaw, Bologna and Malaya – locations featured in her fiction.<sup>137</sup> McMinnies wrote only two novels, *The Flying Fox* and *The Visitors* (1958), both widely praised in contemporary newspapers. *The Visitors* was a Book of the Month choice in the United States and serialised by the BBC in 1972.<sup>138</sup> McMinnies also published articles and short stories in the *New Statesman and Nation*, *Time and Tide*, and *Lilliput*, covering her earlier travels in Europe.

In contrast, Han Suyin left an impressive literary oeuvre. Born in mainland China to a Chinese father and a Belgian mother, Han was educated as a medical doctor in China, Belgium and later in London, where she lived between 1944 and 1948 with her first husband, an officer in the nationalist Kuomintang army. Following his death at the Manchurian front, she moved to Hong Kong

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<sup>135</sup> David Lodge, *The Novelist at the Crossroads and Other Essays in Fiction and Criticism* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986) [1971], p. 18.

<sup>136</sup> [Anon.], 'Miss Cecilie Leslie, Appointed Information Officer', *Indian Information*, Bureau of the Public Information of the Government of India, 8:71 (1 April 1941), p. 214.

<sup>137</sup> Taken from McMinnies's own biography: Mary McMinnies, *Article for Smith's Trade News*, MS undated.

<sup>138</sup> Earle F. Walbridge, 'Mary McMinnies', *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 34:3 (November 1959), p. 186; Sean Day-Lewis, '1958 Novel's "Classic" Treatment', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 June 1972, p. 12.

in 1949, where she met the Australian journalist, Ian Morrison. Their brief relationship would be the inspiration for her debut novel *A Many-Splendored Thing* (1952), which became an international bestseller and was made into the 1955 Hollywood film *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*. This was followed by *... and the Rain my Drink* (1956), a fictional account of the Malayan Emergency. Han's later autobiographies span her childhood in pre-revolutionary China, her family's experience of the 1949 revolution, and her extensive travels in Communist China. She also published laudatory biographies of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, thus establishing a reputation as a loyal defender of the Cultural Revolution.

Finally, Kamala Markandaya was born and educated in India, where she worked as a journalist and travelled widely, before settling in London in 1948 and marrying a British journalist. India would be the primary inspiration for her novels – eleven in total – and she is frequently mentioned alongside Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao, the Indian novelists writing in English who helped shape Western perceptions of India, before and after independence.<sup>139</sup> Her debut novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) enjoyed significant commercial success, but in later life, she was eclipsed by a younger generation of diasporic writers.<sup>140</sup>

Inspired by the efforts of middlebrow scholars to reclaim forgotten female texts, this thesis studies the fiction and non-fiction of the five authors, which has been critically neglected. This scholarly oversight is perhaps unsurprising in light of criticism of the broader field of postcolonial studies, which as Neil Lazarus asserts, has tended to operate with reference to a 'woefully restricted and attenuated corpus of works.'<sup>141</sup> Until recently, postcolonial scholarship has also favoured more experimental texts, whose modernist strategies of resistance are designated representative of postcoloniality.<sup>142</sup> As such, writers who appeal to a broad reading public by creating engaging storylines with realist detail or by working within popular genres have received limited critical attention.<sup>143</sup> Consequently, what Bongie calls the 'foundational bias' of postcolonial criticism has resulted in a narrowly defined end-of-empire canon, excluding the female (and male) middlebrow and in turn underestimating the political significance of this writing.<sup>144</sup> This thesis aims to contribute towards a more inclusive reading of postcolonial fiction.

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<sup>139</sup> Charles R. Larson, 'Out of India: Kamala Markandaya Reappraised', *TLS*, 12 October 2007, pp. 15-16.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Lazarus, p. 22.

<sup>142</sup> Eli Park Sorenson, *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2010), pp. 9-11; Monika Fludernik, 'The Narrative Forms of Postcolonial Fiction', in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature: Volume 2*, ed. by Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 903-37 (pp. 904-05).

<sup>143</sup> Bongie, p. 7; pp. 289-90.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7; Whittle, p. 4.

## Organisation of the thesis

Part I considers the politics of decolonisation, insurgency and counterinsurgency in India, Kenya and Malaya. Chapter 1 studies Indian nationalism and British colonial politics in Leslie's *Goat to Kali*. The chapter's critical focus is on the tensions between Westminster politicians and the British administration in India; between radical and moderate Indian nationalists; between a conservative view of the 'civilising' mission of empire and a more liberal critique of its legacy. Drawing on childhood memories, the tropes of earlier imperial fiction, as well as Leslie's journalistic skills, the novel offers a critique of late colonial politics, albeit coupled with a nostalgic retrospective on her family's role in imperial capitalism. Although its primary interest lies in colonial politics, *Goat to Kali* also addresses anxieties regarding women's class and gender identities that are central to the domestic middlebrow novel.

Chapter 2 examines Huxley's fictional treatment of the Kenyan Emergency in *A Thing to Love*. The chapter foregrounds the influence of her journalism, both in the novel's critical account of the politics of the Emergency and its engagement with the Mau Mau movement. At the same time, the novel's documentary and dialogic qualities are compromised by images of horror, the dark tropes of the exotic and the gradual build-up of suspense. Together, they testify to Huxley's familiarity with earlier imperial sources, as well as her attentiveness to the literary expectations of her readership, even though as the chapter concludes, there are tensions between the novel's political ambitions and its narrative strategies.

Chapter 3 discusses *The Flying Fox*, McMinnies's fictional narrative of the Malayan Emergency. The chapter explores how McMinnies combines fact and fiction to produce a critical account of the British counterinsurgency campaign. The chapter further suggests that McMinnies's interest in the women of colonial Malaya marks her novel as radically distinct from the male fiction of the period, as she foregrounds women's perspectives on the transition from colony to post-colony. Employing narrative conventions associated with the middlebrow, her novel also attends to anxieties of post-war readers about social class and cultural taste, which are further complicated in the late colonial space.

Part II considers the politics and economics of decolonisation during the early years of independence, covering the period's dominant development discourse, and the confluence of Cold War geopolitics and global capitalism. Chapter 4 discusses Han's *The Mountain Is Young*, set in Nepal, and its ambivalent critique of Cold War geopolitics as played out in South Asia, focusing again on the synergies between fact and fiction. Locating the novel within the broader post-war middlebrow context, the chapter also examines the novel's treatment of Cold War cultural politics through its use of character and irony. Lastly, the chapter explores Han's interest in post-war debates on development and the role of foreign aid and highlights her awareness of the environmental impact of Western tourism and investment.



Chapter 5 continues the discussion of development in Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*. The chapter reads the central plot of the construction of a giant dam as a vehicle for a fictional debate on the politics and economics of large infrastructure works, their environmental impact, and the discourse of development more generally. The chapter also studies the novel's awareness of the environmentalism of the poor and Markandaya's use of the middlebrow genre to give visibility to the invisible victims of development projects. Meanwhile, middlebrow tropes of the domestic are shown to convey the tensions and aspirations of expatriate Britons, as they attempt to adjust to life in independent India.

Part III turns to the domestic consequences of decolonisation, focusing on the interrelated themes of decolonisation, immigration and metropolitan disorder. Chapter 6 studies late colonial politics in Huxley's *A Man from Nowhere* and revisits the synergies between her fiction and non-fiction. The chapter discusses the novel's dialogism and its role in communicating the divergent viewpoints of settlers, government officials and the public at home. In common with *A Thing to Love*, the tropes of horror and the exotic are shown to add a sensationalist overtone to Huxley's account, thereby compromising the novel's documentary qualities. Finally, the chapter asks how the genre conventions of middlebrow crime fiction capture the trauma of the imperial encounter, as well as public anxieties about domestic disorder and the loss of traditional values.

Chapter 7 expands on the theme of metropolitan disorder with a discussion of immigration in Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man*. The chapter highlights the novel's nuanced depiction of the spectrum of racial attitudes in 1960s Britain, also documented in contemporary sociological studies. Here, the middlebrow tropes of the home and the neighbourhood assume a variety of meanings, denoting the nation's ambivalent response to immigration, as well as anxieties about urbanisation and frustration with the unfulfilled promises of the welfare state. Exposing emergent social strains, Markandaya's narrative acquires a topicality more commonly associated with younger female writers of the 1960s, illustrating both the flexibility of the female middlebrow and the drawbacks of viewing this fiction through a narrow critical lens.

## **PART I: DECOLONISATION, COLONIAL POLITICS AND COUNTERINSURGENCY**

Part I discusses three novels written during the first decade of post-war decolonisation. The chapters in Part I offer a historicised reading, paying close attention to the novels' documentary and dialogic qualities, whilst also pointing to their connections with earlier imperial fiction. A central theme of this Part is the novels' explicit engagement with the fraught politics of decolonisation, alongside their acknowledgement of the violence of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Due attention is paid too to the authors' critical reflections on official British narratives of orderly transition and successful stewardship. Together, the three chapters highlight the deep engagement of the post-war female middlebrow with the politics of decolonisation.

### **CHAPTER 1: COLONIAL POLITICS AND INDIAN NATIONALISM: CECILIE LESLIE, *GOAT TO KALI* (1948)**

#### **Introduction**

In June 1948, Cecilie Leslie published *Goat to Kali*, a political drama set during the final years of British rule in India.<sup>1</sup> The novel describes a fictional terrorist organisation, which is stirring up unrest in Calcutta and surrounding areas, convinced that their actions, and not Congress's deliberations, will achieve the desired departure of the British. The novel's title relates to the belief that sacrificing '[a] goat to Kali before killing an Englishman has always brought luck (391).' *Goat to Kali* challenges the view that women's end-of-empire fiction is disinterested in late colonial politics or concerned primarily with their personal memories of empire. Locating her narrative at a moment of deep crisis, Leslie presents British colonial policy as flawed and Indian nationalism as ineffective. Through her various protagonists, she offers a timely critique of colonial politics, albeit coupled with a nostalgic retrospective on her own family's role in imperial capitalism.

Combining a terrorist plot and a romantic encounter, *Goat to Kali* contains several narrative elements associated with the middlebrow. A plot-driven novel, set in a reliably constructed external world, featuring tangible fictional characters, it carries the reader forward toward partial resolution. Its main protagonist, Lynn Coles, returns to India after a long absence and seeks to understand the changes in the country's attitude towards the British since her childhood. Politics and romance converge when Lynn becomes engaged to district magistrate Jack Hogan, in charge of security in the Calcutta region and selected by the terrorists as their next assassination target. In a parallel plot, a young Bengali woman, Tara Devi, is groomed to be Jack's killer, and after being raped by one of the terrorists, becomes a tool in their hands, because 'pregnant women do not get hanged' (228).

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<sup>1</sup> Cecilie Leslie, *Goat to Kali* (London: Cassell, 1948). All references will be to this edition and will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

Besides its carefully described political context, additional authenticity derives from Leslie's use of autobiographical detail. Her portrait of Lynn likely draws on her own professional experience, while the figure of Jack may have been inspired by her husband Arthur Hartley, a district magistrate who, according to the *Daily Mail* 'once or twice, was nearly killed by a Bengal mob.'<sup>2</sup> Although most of the novel's action takes place in India, several of its characters have metropolitan connections. Lynn worked as a commercial artist in London before travelling to India. In Calcutta, she joins the staff of *India's Own Weekly*, the latest business venture of Sir Benjamin Forrest, who besides running the successful woman's magazine *My Own Weekly*, meddles in Indian politics. Miss Waddley, Forrest's loyal assistant, is sent to India to head the new outlet and inadvertently creates an opportunity for the terrorists to propagate their ideas using her printing presses when she hires the Bengali Anil Kumar Dutt, despite protestations from the British police, who are aware of his terrorist past.

A forgotten text today, *Goat to Kali*'s literary and historical interest stems from two main factors: its explicit engagement with the politics of decolonisation and its interest in Indian nationalism. Foregrounding its documentary and dialogic qualities, my first objective in this chapter is to demonstrate how Leslie's novel both challenges and endorses the dominant political discourse of decolonisation. Although the events depicted in the novel predate the violence and displacement accompanying independence and Partition, I show that Leslie's political story departs from the official British narrative that 'Britain had withdrawn gracefully from India and had handed the keys to the rightful representatives of *two* South Asian nations.'<sup>3</sup> The official discourse also assumed a continued global role for Britain, as imperial losses could be glossed over with the reinvention of the Commonwealth, in which, as Darwin writes, 'the units of empire could be seamlessly fitted when they were "ready."<sup>4</sup> Setting her story only a few years before this 'graceful handover,' Leslie presents a British government whose authority has been seriously undermined, a divided Indian political landscape and a future in which Britain's global role is at risk of being eclipsed by America. Cognisant of the events of 1947, the 1948 reviewers acknowledged the topical interest of Leslie's political novel, in turn illustrating the ability of the female middlebrow novel to bring the distant colonial conflict to its metropolitan readers.

My second objective is to reflect on *Goat to Kali*'s narrative strategies, drawing attention to its connections with late imperial fiction. I argue that Leslie works in a longer tradition of female novels, which fictionalise women's experience of what Lassner calls 'the dreams of Empire and its

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Coster, 'Stage Struck', *Daily Mail*, 31 May 1948, p. 3. Coster concludes: '[h]er husband, however, is safe back in England, learning to be a farmer.'

<sup>3</sup> John Darwin, 'Memory of Empire in Britain: A Preliminary View', in *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations: The Aftermath of Decolonization, 1945-2013*, ed. by Dietmar Rothermund (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 18-37 (p. 24). Italics in original.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

nightmares.<sup>5</sup> Yet, retreat from empire is not solely a ‘private affair embedded in domestic relations and quietly, if persistently, agnostic about the weight of history,’ as argued by Antoinette Burton.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the violence that accompanied decolonisation is at the heart of the novel’s plot, while its fictional characters, British and Indian, are acutely aware of their respective roles in the long route to independence. As I will explain, Leslie draws on both childhood memories and her adult journalistic skills to produce the mimetic and dialogic qualities that drive her novel’s critique of empire and its ending. However, when familiar imperial tropes of the colonial home and household are re-employed in this post-imperial text, the novel’s criticism is tempered, resulting in a more ambiguous account of decolonisation.

Although its primary interest lies in colonial politics, *Goat to Kali* also addresses anxieties regarding women’s class and gender identities that are central to the metropolitan middlebrow novel. Hence, my third objective is to locate *Goat to Kali* within the wider middlebrow genre. I pay particular attention to Leslie’s use of dialogic irony and intertextuality, alongside the tropes commonly employed by female authors to foreground tensions within post-war ideologies of femininity, and between popular and middlebrow culture. Interestingly, although contemporary reviews suggest that Leslie was relatively successful in her political project, her novel’s social themes (marriage, domesticity and woman’s work) were largely ignored.

### ***Goat to Kali* and the crisis of empire**

In the foreword to *Goat to Kali*, Leslie explains that her novel is a ‘work of fiction against a background of historical fact in India between October 1941 and September 1942’ (vii). Most of its action is based in and around Calcutta, and the reader is introduced to the main political events of these twelve months: the failed mission of Sir Stafford Cripps to secure Indian participation in the war; Congress’s endorsement of the ‘Quit India’ resolution and the subsequent arrests of thousands of Congress members.<sup>7</sup> When Lynn arrives in Calcutta in October 1941, she is fleeing the war in Europe, only to be confronted with the growing threat of the Japanese army. Preparations are under way for the British army in India to take up a more active role – shortly after her arrival, her brother Charlie Coles decides to join and suggests that Lynn may want to register as a nurse or join the WAC(I).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, p. 191.

<sup>6</sup> Antoinette Burton, ‘End of Empire Histories in the post-1945 Novel’, in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 10: The Novel in South and South East Asia since 1945*, ed. by Alex Tickell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 105-17 (p. 117).

<sup>7</sup> This section draws on: Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain’s Asian Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2008); Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People’s History of India’s Second World War* (London: Vintage, 2016); Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> WAC(I) or the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (India) was set up in early 1942. Both Indian and British women were able to join. See Khan, *Raj at War*, p. 154.

In actuality, the first Japanese raids on Calcutta started in December 1942. However, the political temperature had risen significantly following the British government's September 1939 declaration that India was at war along with the rest of the empire, without consulting India's political leaders. Although the so-called August (1940) Offer promised Dominion status after the war in return for war-time cooperation, it was rejected by the Indian National Congress ('Congress') party, India's leading nationalist movement. Civil disobedience resumed and many of its leaders were imprisoned. Subsequently, a series of Japanese successes, in particular the surrender of Hong Kong (December 1941) and Singapore (February 1942), and the invasion of Malaya and Burma, which culminated in the fall of Rangoon and the exodus of thousands of Britons (May 1942), revealed Britain's weakened military power.<sup>9</sup> In some quarters, British losses at the hand of the Japanese led to calls for the latter to overthrow British rule in India. In April 1942, these sentiments led to the formation of the Indian National Army (INA) by Indian soldiers who had defected to the Japanese whilst taken prisoner of war after the invasion of Malaya.<sup>10</sup> At the time of the novel's publication, events had of course progressed, with the creation of India and Pakistan, the violence following Partition and the outbreak of the first Indo-Pakistani war in late 1947. By 1948, more than ten million people had been displaced and estimates are that up to one million people may have died.<sup>11</sup> On 30 January 1948, Gandhi was assassinated in New Delhi.

But in the spring of 1942, Cripps's mission and the future of India featured prominently in the British press, revealing a clear sense of urgency – 'We must remember also that it is from India that one of the strongest counter blows must be struck at the advance of tyranny and aggression,' Churchill declared in March – and the recognition that communal disagreements continued to present significant obstacles.<sup>12</sup> Cripps's offer on behalf of the War Cabinet – full Dominion status after the war and limited immediate constitutional concessions – was well received in Britain, with *The Times* describing it as 'a piece of constructive statesmanship in the highest British tradition,' confidently stating that 'on all sides there has been a new note of confidence in British sincerity of purpose.'<sup>13</sup> Yet, when talks broke down in April, British newspapers were quick to condemn the Indian leaders, and Congress in particular, for their unwillingness to compromise and for raising last-minute demands, while praising Cripps for his patience and perseverance. In contrast, *India Information*, the monthly magazine edited by Leslie, provided mostly neutral coverage of the mission, publishing statements, letters and interviews with the various parties.

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<sup>9</sup> The exodus from Rangoon is fictionalised in Leslie's novel *The Golden Stairs* (1968).

<sup>10</sup> Khan, *Raj at War*, pp. 118-19; Bayly and Harper, pp. 19-23.

<sup>11</sup> The exact figures are unknown (Khan, *Great Partition*, p. 6; p. 212).

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Mansergh (ed.), *Constitutional Relations between Britain and India: The Transfer of power 1942-7: Volume 2* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1970), p. 407 (11 March 1942).

<sup>13</sup> [Anon.], 'The India Plan', *The Times*, 30 March 1942, p. 5.

Later historians present a more complicated picture. Nicholas Owen argues that as a result of tensions in Churchill's War Cabinet, Congress was not given the war-time powers it demanded.<sup>14</sup> Owen's research also reveals disagreements within the Labour party, previously supportive of Congress, but now divided on the latter's perceived readiness for democratic government.<sup>15</sup> In the end, lack of support from London, frictions between Cripps and Viceroy Linlithgow, and Congress's distrust of the vague proposals for increased participation in the Viceroy's Executive Council all contributed to the failure of the mission.<sup>16</sup> Cripps himself blamed Nehru and Gandhi, but did not divulge any Cabinet tensions.<sup>17</sup> His biographer Peter Clarke opines that, although the brief was ambiguous from the outset and Cripps did not enjoy the full support of either the War Cabinet in London or the Viceroy, ultimately it was Congress's rejection that sealed the fate of the mission.<sup>18</sup>

As we shall see, *Goat to Kali* engages not only with wartime resistance to British rule, but also with the longer history of anti-imperial activity, both violent and non-violent. In her foreword, Leslie clarifies that '[t]he revolutionary organisation, literature, vows and religious customs of Bengali terrorists are based on fact, but the Hindustan Revolutionary Party, the Secret Wing of Congress, is fictitious; so are the described characters of this imaginary society' (vii). Later, she expands: 'The party described itself as a Secret Wing of Congress, but in fact acted independently. Its policy was one of terrorism and co-operation with the Japanese' (140). In fact, what emerges from close historicist reading is that Leslie synthesises four distinct phases in the Indian anti-colonial movement: the wide-spread resistance during World War Two; Bengali revolutionary terrorism during the 1920s and 1930s; the earlier Jugantar and Anushilan movements; and the nineteenth-century indigo riots in Bengal and Bihar.<sup>19</sup>

Operating 'at the margins of factuality and fictionalization,' *Goat to Kali* exemplifies the often overlooked political ambitions of the female middlebrow, both in its commitment to the documentary mode and in its use of narrative voice to bring the politics of decolonisation to the metropolitan reader.<sup>20</sup> Of note too are the novel's efforts to focalise colonial politics through British and Indian protagonists, demonstrating the author's genuine interest in understanding the different aspects of India's protracted independence negotiations. I start with a discussion of *Goat to Kali*'s engagement with the histories of anti-colonial resistance through both primary and secondary characters, considering first, Indian nationalism, and second, the British response. I also explore how

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Owen, 'The Cripps Mission of 1942: A Reinterpretation', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 30:1 (2002), 61-98 (pp. 83-84).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85-87.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Clarke, *The Cripps Version: The Life of Sir Stafford Cripps 1889-1952* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 292; pp. 325-28.

<sup>19</sup> For more detail on the Jugantar and Anushilan movements, see Peter Heehs, 'Revolutionary Terrorism in British Bengal', in *Terror and the Postcolonial*, ed. by Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 156-69.

<sup>20</sup> Underwood, *Undeclared War*, p. 8.

Leslie uses comedy and intertextuality to expose the shortcomings of Westminster politicians and to convey the politics of decolonisation to a readership that was likely fragmented, comprising both the expatriate reader and, paraphrasing Jack, the '[p]eople in England [who] will never understand our difficulty in India. They never have. It's no good trying to explain' (10).

### ***Goat to Kali and Indian nationalism***

*Goat to Kali*'s Indian characters play a central role in the plot, yet their historical interest stems from their close correspondence to key figures in the history of Bengali terrorism. In the first instance, Dutt, editor of the terrorists' newspaper, and Bhim Chettur, secretary of the party, provide a link with the revolutionary movement of the 1920s and 1930s. A former participant in the 1930 Chittagong armoury attack (127), Dutt endeavours to copy the tactics of the earlier movement and exploit the current weakness of the British government in India to create chaos and disruption. 'With one or two road blocks down the Grand Trunk Road military movements could be stopped in Bengal' (149), he declares, as '[i]t would be easy to paralyse communications and administrations in a loosely governed country like India. The Chittagong raid of 1930 had proved that' (149).<sup>21</sup>

Chettur is driven by his communist principles – 'I realised that men starved because of the sins of men. I became a Communist and searched deep trying to find the answer to our country's poverty' (308) – and his deep hatred of the British and 'the arrogant British claim of trusteeship of dumb millions' (310). Both Dutt and Chettur hold the West responsible for India's poverty: 'we are the poorest people on earth. We do not even control the companies that own our railways and tramways; they all belong to the foreigners' (297). They further praise the killings of three British magistrates in Midnapur in 1931: 'what is the blood of a few men when the freedom of the Motherland is at stake?' (159).<sup>22</sup> Whilst acknowledging that 'Ghandhi-ji's civil disobedience in the early thirties had the country thoroughly roused' (159), they dismiss his commitment to non-violent resistance: 'What a waste of time the non-co-operation campaigns had been, even though on the surface the Mahatma had appeared to gain concessions from the British' (147).

A further link to the early years of Bengali terrorism is provided through some of the older members of the party, who took part in political robberies (*dacoities*), 'helped to derail the down mail from Chittagong' and 'hewed wood and cracked stones in an Andaman convict camp' (144). These fictional terrorists reflect nostalgically on the early days of Bengali activism and its spiritual foundations, noting that in their days, 'the spiritual significance of their movement was more deeply studied. The true meaning of Sakti worship, its symbolic representation in Kali, was important to the

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<sup>21</sup> A raid conducted by the revolutionary Indian Republican Army, led by Surya Sen (Heehs, p. 171).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

heart of all revolutionaries' (156).<sup>23</sup> They also recall two widely publicised terrorist attacks that took place on foreign soil: 'There was the wonderful story of Madan Lal Dhingra, who shot Sir William Curzon-Wyllie at the Imperial Institute in the heart of London, and that other martyr, Mewa Singh, who killed Mr Hopkinson in Vancouver' (156).<sup>24</sup> Mixing fact and fiction, here Leslie refers to the Jugantar and the Anushilan groups, which were active in Bengal in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Both recruited young men, who were trained in physical activities as well as revolutionary thinking. They employed religious imagery, in particular of the Hindu goddess Kali, and required new recruits to undergo secret initiations.<sup>25</sup> Jugantar published a magazine of the same name, calling for violent uprising against the British.<sup>26</sup> In *Goat to Kali*, Dutt is planning to launch his own magazine *Kal*, which amongst other things aims to incite India's peasants to riot (162).<sup>27</sup>

Reflecting on the historical record, Peter Heehs remarks that the early Bengali terrorists were not always effective and many targeted British officials escaped unharmed.<sup>28</sup> Violent activity had, however, an indirect impact in that it forced the British government to engage with Gandhi and Congress, as leaders of the legitimate nationalist movement.<sup>29</sup> In the novel, Leslie uses her characters Dutt and Chettur to convey the younger generation's frustration with this early history of Indian nationalism. Dutt believes that '[i]f the early terrorist parties, the Jugantar and Anushilan movements, had not declined but had assumed power, as Congress had done, independence would have been established long ago' (147-48), whilst Chettur reflects on a failed attempt of the two associations to join forces in the late 1920s: 'The two principal terrorist associations – the Anushilan of East Bengal and the Jugantar of West Bengal, had joined forces, but the revolution failed because the hot-heads of Chittagong would not wait for the signal for the general uprising' (159).<sup>30</sup> He further dismisses the older generation as 'fanatics [who] were convinced of their mission by a religious, mystical approach. Nowadays the method was to lay more stress on ideologies, politics' (157).

Whilst Leslie's fictional terrorists are acutely aware of the history of their movement, the novel's main focus is on the war years. According to Yasmin Khan, World War Two precipitated the unravelling of the Raj, as the structures of the state were irreparably damaged and the empire lost 'its final shreds of legitimacy.'<sup>31</sup> By late 1941, faith in imperial authority was already severely

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<sup>23</sup> In her glossary, Leslie explains that Sakti or Shakti refers to the worship of the goddess's power or energy (p. 406). See also Alex Tickell, *Terrorism, Insurgency and Indian-English Literature, 1830-1947* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 165.

<sup>24</sup> Madan Lal Dhingra was a member of a London-based organisation (centred in India House) and shot Curzon-Wyllie in 1909 (Tickell, *Terrorism*, pp. 135-38). Mewa Singh belonged to a revolutionary group based in Vancouver and murdered William Hopkinson in 1914.

<sup>25</sup> Heehs, p. 162; pp. 166-67; Tickell, *Terrorism*, p. 165.

<sup>26</sup> Heehs, p. 158.

<sup>27</sup> In her glossary, Leslie refers to both the cult of the goddess Kali (consort of Shiva) and to the concept of *Kal* or time, adding 'she [Kali] is considered the Timeless One, the Primal Mother and the deity of rhythm' (p. 403).

<sup>28</sup> Heehs, p. 169; p. 174.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>31</sup> Khan, *Raj at War*, p. xi; p. xvi.



undermined and a new generation of activists, less tolerant of Gandhi's belief in non-violence, was keen to change the political order their parents had been part of.<sup>32</sup> With the main Congress leaders in prison after August 1942, young radicals were planning acts of sabotage, targeting railways, ammunition factories and army depots. In *Goat to Kali*, this perceived loss of imperial authority provides a major boost to the terrorists' campaign:

The end of February 1942 witnessed, Dutt was convinced, the death-struggle of the British Empire in the East, and the long overdue hardening of Congress policy towards the hatred British had at last begun. [...] 'The British are finished. Think of it – Hongkong gone! Singapore fallen! Rangoon on the verge of collapse! Bravo the Japs! Bravo, brother Asiatics! Make haste now to invade India for you will find *us* ready to help and welcome you. At least *we* recognise you as our deliverers.' (139-40)<sup>33</sup>

Dutt believes that the British Army has been demoralised by its defeats in Malaya, whilst the August 1940 offer of Dominion status merely indicated that 'the Raj wasn't feeling so sure of itself' (148). *Goat to Kali*'s narrative also shows that Dutt and his colleagues are fully familiar with the details of the Cripps negotiations and undermines the critical view that Indian characters are either silent or absent in the end-of-empire novel.<sup>34</sup> They are particularly frustrated with the disputed matter of delegated Indian responsibilities, with Chettur angrily claiming:

We want independence now. [...] They talk of a real transfer of power – well, then, why don't they cancel the Viceroy's veto? They never use it, they say. Then show your trust in us, we reply, and withdraw the veto absolutely. (298)

The terrorists further blame the British for the growing divergence between Hindu and Muslim positions on the future of India – 'It was the British who encouraged communal strife, [...] Cripps wanted to carve up India by encouraging Pakistan' (298). And they complain that Britain's politicians are more interested in global power politics than in India's future: 'They are trying to get American opinion on their side' (299), predicting a future shift in global power relations: 'If these English devils do quit India, I'm sure the Americans will step in and start exploiting us. We already have foreign soldiers filling the streets' (304).

However, the text is less even-handed than it appears at first sight. By giving the reader direct access to the conversations of the Bengali terrorists, Leslie privileges the extremist elements of Indian nationalism, presumably to build suspense into her plot. But this means that she pays less attention to mainstream views, which are conveyed either by the narrator in the form of brief background sketches, or, as we shall see later, through Jack's critique of Congress. In contrast, prominence is given to the terrorists' views, with the dialogue showing their impatience with Gandhi and Congress. For instance, Dutt complains: 'let's hope this inert and useless Congress will be persuaded to stir itself. At least with the Mahatma's resignation with his futile policy of non-violence there is hope'

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 181-82.

<sup>33</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>34</sup> Hammond, pp. 157-59.

(140). But he has not faith in Nehru either: ‘perhaps Nehru is no better. At least, he is anti-British, and that might galvanise him to action’ (140). Elsewhere the narrator intervenes strongly to highlight the fanaticism driving the revolutionaries, explaining how Chettur’s voice ‘became tense with passionate conviction as he struck the chords of Tara’s own fanaticism. They seemed to unite in a whirling excitement of words, emotions, and half-understood impulses to do, to be, to give all they could’ (296).

The narrator’s irony further undermines the nationalist cause when revealing the inconsistencies and half-truths embraced by the fictional terrorists – ‘The majority of our people don’t get more than one meal a day’ – Dutt sucked the sugar-cane juice from his finger-nails – ‘and the great mass of our village people suffer from chronic hunger’ (302) – casting doubt on the nature of their commitment to India’s political future. Here Leslie writes in the tradition of earlier imperial fiction, which commonly portrayed Indian terrorists as physically degenerate, morally weak and influenced by nationalist propaganda they do not fully understand.<sup>35</sup> Highlighting their immaturity, Leslie injects a further element of doubt as to the terrorists’ integrity of purpose:

‘This is a British war – we were never asked if we’d like to join it.’ Golap voiced a well-worn grievance.

‘Poor India,’ Tara said. ‘Britain is to blame for everything.’

This sincere but ingenuous statement made both Dutt and Chettur smile, though it evoked serious assent from Golap and Andoo and Ram Krishna.

[...]

Dutt ceased arguing. It was too hot to drum a more adult point of view into boys like Andoo, Golap, and Ram. Besides, why bother? Provided they hated bitterly enough they would serve the cause as well as the man who hated for more rational reasons. (304-05)

Leslie also perpetuates colonial stereotypes, in this instance the trope of the lazy oriental: ‘The British have kept us backward,’ Golap repeated. [...] Everyone agreed it was Britain’s fault whatever the subject, and the lazy Golap found this an effortless way of appearing to take an intelligent interest in matters which bored him’ (303). Notably, these stereotypes feature in the discourse of her British characters, even those, who like Lynn profess to support the nationalist cause (though not its violent expression), seen here in her judgement of Dutt:

A revolutionary should be sinewy, haggard, with a lean and hungry look, she decided. Mr Dutt was not at all sinewy, but had a padding of blubber covering his neck and legs; even his knuckles looked as soft as a baby’s. The genuine assassin should not, moreover, look comic, and that was the principle [sic] impression left upon her by Dutt. (136)

Looking back, earlier imperial novels, notably Duncan’s *The Burnt Offering* (1909), Diver’s *Far to Seek: A Romance of England and India* (1921), and Edmund Candler’s *Siri Ram – Revolutionist* (1912) and *Abdication* (1922), emphasised the British containment of seditious activities and dismissed Indian nationalism as ineffective and indicative of India’s need for continued British

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<sup>35</sup> Parry observes that early twentieth-century British commentators routinely described Bengali terrorists as vain, undergrown and sentimental (*Delusions*, pp. 150-53). See also Tickell, *Terrorism*, p. 161.

guardianship.<sup>36</sup> Writing shortly after independence, Leslie presents Indian terrorism as a response to both declining British authority and disillusion with mainstream nationalist politics. Dutt and Chettur are portrayed as well-informed, if not fanatic, and the latter in particular is given an undiluted anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist agenda. But Leslie retains the trope of the gullible radical, substituting the male student for an uneducated young woman, Tara Devi, who fervently believes that ‘through her the motherland would achieve Swaraj [...] India might cast off the yoke of the oppressor’ (187). Tara is positioned in a long line of female freedom fighters: ‘Let us not forget those frail girls Sushil and Sarifa, who killed Howard of Bera, and Devi Basu, who fired three shots at the Governor of Bengal’ (159). As far as I can tell, Sushil, Sarifa and Devi Basu are fictional characters, possibly modelled on Suniti Chowdhury and Shanti Ghosh, who assassinated a British District Magistrate in 1931, or Bina Das, who shot Bengali governor Sir Stanley Jackson in 1932.<sup>37</sup> But in contrast to her fictional counterparts, Tara is given little agency and serves as the instrument for a revolution directed by men.<sup>38</sup>

### **British anxieties and memories of empire**

Memories of the 1930s haunt the British characters in the novel and Jack is said to have lost his friends Peddie, Burge, and Douglas (129), thus creating a link between this fictional district magistrate and the victims of the earlier-mentioned Midnapore murders. He further fears that ‘India would witness a terrorist campaign far out-rivalling the bombing, sabotage, and assassinations of the thirties’ (334). Interestingly, Jack associates the pro-fascist sympathies in some quarters with earlier acts of imperial violence, briefly registering an internal critique of empire:

Subhas Bose, who had escaped from Bengal in January, broadcast from Berlin sympathising with the hardships of the poor people from the province; from Azad Hindustan radio station plays could be heard, re-enacting the shameful story of General Dyer and Jalianwallabagh and other dark chapters of Britain’s history in India. (233-34)<sup>39</sup>

In common with the Indian characters, the Britons in the novel are aware of the threat to British authority in India, with Jack remarking that ‘the great mass [...] were thoroughly dissatisfied with British rule and were openly jubilant at the disaster of Burma and Malaya’ (233). However, the British characters’ main interest lies in the intense political deliberations of 1942, covering the Cripps mission; Congress’s approval of the ‘Quit India’ resolution on 8 August; Gandhi’s ‘Quit India’ (later referred to as his ‘do or die’) speech that same day; and the arrest of Gandhi and several Congress leaders on 9 August. Jack and his colleagues are particularly concerned that the ‘Quit India’ policy,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 159-66.

<sup>37</sup> Ania Loomba, *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 36; p. 52.

<sup>38</sup> *The Burnt Offering* assigns a limited political role to an educated Bengali woman (see also Hubel, pp. 65-68).

<sup>39</sup> Subhas Chandra Bose led the INA and had spent time in Germany seeking Nazi support for the Indian cause. See Khan, *Raj at War*, p. 118; pp. 218-19; Bayly and Harper, pp. 19-23.

first presented by Gandhi in April 1942, would bring India 'to the brink of revolution' (316). When moving on to the amended draft (ratified by Congress in August), they emphasise its potential for violent uprising.<sup>40</sup>

The British need not all go, the new draft conceded. The Allied troops could remain to protect India against invasion. But the resolution stated clearly in its opening sentence, 'British rule in India must end immediately.' The resolution ended with the threat of a 'widespread struggle' against the Government if the British refused to comply with this request. (316)

Jack is critical too of Congress's tactics in the spring and summer of 1942: "What I can't understand" – Jack sipped his whisky – "is how Congress really expects us to abdicate without leaving any form of responsible government behind" (316-17). Reflecting on the failure of the Cripps mission, he firmly lays the blame on Congress: 'Where is all this agitation leading? [...] Why couldn't Congress believe the British promise to grant independence, repeatedly and publicly confirmed in the August offer, statements by Amery, the Viceroy, and by Cripps' (334). He appears more favourably disposed towards the Muslim League leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, 'who read the Congress defiance of the Government at such a critical time as an attempt to "coerce the British Government to surrender to a Congress Raj"' (317). But he admits that 'it was disappointment with the swift, sudden failure of the Cripps mission that had spread bitterness against the Government and hardened Congress's decision to attack the Government' (315).

In contrast, the third-person narrator adopts a more ambivalent stance, finding fault with British and Congress politicians alike. On the one hand, the narrator blames the British for the failure of Cripps's mission:

Sir Stafford Cripps had come and Sir Stafford Cripps had gone: the failure of another mission. Far from convincing Indians of Britain's sincerity in seeking to grant independence, the proposals offended every political party, the Congress, the Moslem League, the other minorities. To the leisurely, barter-loving Indian the idea of attempting to conclude such a stupendous deal as India's future between March 25<sup>th</sup> and April 10<sup>th</sup>, seventeen days, was folly. (231)

Inserting a chorus of voices, the narrator continues: 'Some said it was insulting. The mission's true motive, others pointed out, was not to benefit India: it was perhaps to placate American opinion or to bribe India's co-operation in the war effort. Who could tell?' (231). However, the narrator sides with public opinion in India when asserting: 'No single event in the troublous [sic] year of 1942 engendered so much bad feeling and anti-British spite as the well-meaning but misunderstood Cripps mission' (232). Yet later, the narrator reveals his or her sympathies with the British authorities when discussing Gandhi's 'Quit India' speech and remarking positively on the government's handling of the situation:

After the meeting of Congress leaders in Bombay, when, as Jack predicted, their resolution calling the country to rebellion had been ratified, the Government of India acted ruthlessly, and, it seemed for the moment, efficiently. All the important leaders were arrested. The country gasped.

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<sup>40</sup> For the text of the resolution, see Mansergh, pp. 621-24 (8 August 1942).

No one credited the spineless Centre with such swift action. At first there had been little reaction among rank-and-file Congress. The anticipated storm-centre of disturbance, Calcutta, appeared quiet enough. Authorities started to congratulate themselves. (354)

Gandhi had given his supporters ‘a mantra, a short one, that I give you. You might imprint it on your hearts and let every breath of yours give expression to it.’<sup>41</sup> His rousing ‘Do or Die’ stands at the heart of his speech: ‘We shall either free India or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery. [...] Nothing, however, should be done secretly. This is an open rebellion.’<sup>42</sup> Yet, it is dismissed by Leslie’s narrator who confidently asserts: ‘If Gandhi’s exhortation “do or die” and his challenge “this is open rebellion” had not stirred his followers, perhaps nothing much would happen’ (354). Of note too is the omission of elements in Gandhi’s speech that emphasised his continued commitment to peaceful resistance and his exhortation to abstain from hatred towards the British people: ‘Our quarrel is not with the British people, we fight their imperialism [...] We must, therefore, purge ourselves of hatred.’<sup>43</sup> Significantly, the narrator’s terse paraphrasing of the speech reveals an implicit alignment with the official British view, even though earlier in the text a more critical stance was adopted.

Moving beyond the immediate politics of 1942, independence is a central part of the dialogue between the novel’s main British protagonists. At first, Leslie sets up a clear dichotomy between Lynn’s unreserved support for self-rule and Jack’s disapproval of nationalist politics. Lynn is appalled by the arrogance of her compatriots and their inability to accept that the time has come for India to be independent: ‘I never understand why people accept change in every other country but resent it so bitterly in India’ (11). She is consistent too in her critique of the British in India – ‘They were marionettes, these smug men and pretty girls, who refused to admit that their cosy world was a rapidly ending dream’ (54) – and their ignorance of India’s poverty and the war in Europe: ‘Did anyone feel humble or self-conscious at this peacetime routine while war-torn London struggled through the terrible blitz?’ (54). In contrast, Jack is dismissive of demands for self-rule: ‘All an Indian Ministry is concerned with is getting its supporters into power, [...] They don’t give a damn for administration. Well, let them govern the country their own way. But don’t force me into the mess’ (352).

But cracks appear in the confident discourse of both characters, as Lynn and Jack worry about the deteriorating political situation and the fragility of British authority. While Lynn is adamant that the time for independence has come and that Jack holds out-dated views – ‘She wasn’t going to argue with Hogan – after all, he could give only the official point of view’ (46) – she nervously contemplates the change in the political climate:

Lynn, like most Europeans in Calcutta, was aware of the change in attitude of the Indian toward the British. Was it a feeling of equality, even superiority to white people? An Asiatic race had

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<sup>41</sup> *The Quit India Speeches*, Section II <<https://www.mkgandhi.org/speeches/speechMain.htm>>.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

chased the British army out of Burma, destroyed the vaunted sea power of the Royal Navy: it looked as if the Asiatic New Order was at last destroying European domination. (232)

Jack's inner dialogue exposes similar contradictions: confidence in his own ability to understand India – 'The only way to understand the place was to live in it' (241) – and a recognition of the limits of the 'civilising' mission: 'His own blundering Anglo-Saxon race, Jack reflected, had sought to spread ideas of democracy with its conquest, but with what pitiful confusion' (242).

In this highly dialogic text, the recurrent use of indirect speech stands out and contributes to the novel's political ambivalence. As the above quotes indicate, it undermines the protagonists' certainties and reveals an emotional engagement with events they both claim to approach in a rational and non-prejudiced manner. Leslie's use of indirect speech conveys an ambiguity that is not immediately apparent from direct speech and exemplifies Bakhtin's concept of double-voiced speech. But indirect speech may also expose deeper tensions that linger beneath the textual surface and reveal ideological contradictions. Here it may signal that the breakdown of imperial authority can no longer be mediated through direct speech, recalling Sinfield's claim that characters fall silent at the moment when their speech would reveal the immense strains in the dominant ideology.<sup>44</sup> This is illustrated in Jack's private reflections:

The annoying thing was that she was often justified in her criticisms, [...] her fundamental convictions – that the British in India were usurpers and fools, that India belonged to the Indians and should be promptly handed over to them – these irritating views were unaltered and continued to be pronounced at every opportunity. (237-38)

Aware that his own worldview is untenable, yet unable to convince Lynn of the flaws in her liberal thinking, Jack's silence denotes a breakpoint in the text, where imperial and liberal ideologies collide. As such, Leslie's use of indirect speech allows the contradictions to erupt in full view, exposing the reader to the faultlines within the discourse of decolonisation. No attempt is made to reconcile these contradictions, illustrating that texts attempting to negotiate faultlines may fail to contain awkward or divergent views.<sup>45</sup>

In a further illustration of Leslie's use of comedy as a subversive device, irony inflects the voice of the third-person narrator, who as we have seen, frequently undermines British authority, aiming in particular at Jack: 'It was unfortunate for Jack Hogan that these critical events were taking place during his wedding and honeymoon' (316). The narrator's mockery also exposes the schism between metropolitan politicians' understanding of colonial politics and the political reality in India:

But though Sir Stafford may have escaped thankfully from Delhi, the proposals, and the hot weather, India was left with all three. The clauses of the Draft Declaration continued to be the subject of acrimonious debate, and the opinions of Indians on the British increased in malevolence as the hot weather progressed. (232)

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<sup>44</sup> Sinfield, *Faultlines*, p. 74.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Foregrounding the narrow-mindedness of the British in India, the narrator's irony dissolves the integrity of the imperial ideology: 'Memsahibs complained of insolence from shop-keepers; [...] "What is India coming to!" memsahibs bleated, as they had bleated off and on for two hundred years' (232). This is a familiar use of satire, showing British arrogance and foolishness, and encountered in amongst others, Rudyard Kipling's short stories, E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934).

Leslie's ironic narrator also conveys the distrust between the British community in India and visiting metropolitan politicians. Specifically, through her portrait of Sir Benjamin Forrest – 'always a nuisance about India' (89) – Leslie mounts a not very subtle critique of metropolitan politics. Again, there is a link with earlier imperial fiction, as Sir Benjamin's meddling in Indian politics recalls visitors such as Kipling's Pagett, M.P.: 'He found he had enough to write a book on India. (This he did later, thus adding his name to that long list of European authors who need only three months in India to know all about their subject)' (96).<sup>46</sup> Describing Sir Benjamin as 'the acknowledged champion of the Indian nationalist' (94), the narrator instantly challenges that effort, in the process trivialising both Westminster politics and the British press:

From this time Benjamin Forrest beat one monotonous message on his political tom-tom: he was India's friend; he stood for the rights of the under-dog, the crushed multitude of India.

[...]

During Debates on India it was Sir Benjamin who asked sensational questions and demanded an elucidation of current Indian grievances.

His fame spread to India, where his most trivial utterances were reproduced, with a photograph of himself, throughout the vernacular and nationalist press. (95)

Sir Benjamin's character is used too to expose British commercial interests, as he anticipates significant profit opportunities from India's independence, foreseeing later criticism of neocolonialism (discussed in chapters 4 and 5):

it was obvious that the industrialists behind the Congress party would open up the country. India was one of the richest countries in the world and its wealth was scarcely tapped. Sooner or later the Indian businessman no less than the European in India would enjoy a phenomenal boom period. (105)

Oblivious to the conflict between his business plans and his self-declared championship of India's poor, Sir Benjamin exemplifies women's use of irony to subvert the dominant (male) discourse.

Thus far, I have shown that Leslie's use of narrative voice and irony produces an ambiguous account of decolonisation, neither fully condemning nor fully supporting the nationalist cause. Central to the novel's critique of colonial politics, the narrator's voice draws the reader into the messy politics of decolonisation and highlights the attendant uncertainties and contradictions in the discourse of

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<sup>46</sup> "'Ah? You'll know all about it in three months. Come in to lunch,'" said Orde.' Rudyard Kipling, 'The Enlightenments of Pagett, M.P.' <[https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2334/2334-h/2334-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0084](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2334/2334-h/2334-h.htm#link2H_4_0084)> [1890]. Likewise, Candler's *Siri Ram* and Duncan's *The Burnt Offering* mock visiting politicians.

those most closely involved in this process. In contrast to earlier imperial novels such as *The Burnt Offering* and *Siri Ram*, Leslie's narrator no longer lends their unequivocal support to British rule, while official British viewpoints compete with a range of alternative opinions, British and Indian. As I explain next, Leslie similarly modifies the tropes of the colonial home and household to represent dwindling imperial authority.

### **Home and the imperial legacy**

A popular trope in imperial novels, the colonial home symbolised both the 'civilising' mission and the hierarchical relationships this implied.<sup>47</sup> In this fiction, the home and the expertly managed household project the image of British civilisation, keeping India, often figured as the jungle, safely at bay.<sup>48</sup> In *Goat to Kali*, these same tropes become part of a narrative about loss, expressing imperial nostalgia, whilst conveying an ambivalence already apparent in women's late imperial writing.<sup>49</sup>

When Lynn arrives in Calcutta, the sighting of the built-up riverbanks brings back memories of the India of her childhood, together with the realisation that this India has vanished:

The land she knew lay across great plains, traversed by avenues of mango trees, blown with dust. In her India, mystery lay sleeping in cobra-haunted forests and there were no other children to play with for miles and miles. This prosperous, sparkling shore, with its white jute factories, casuarinas dipping to the water's edge, was something foreign to her sun-dowsed, brown, somnolent India. Her memory was of earth as old and quiet as time, but the shores to which she now returned spouted factory chimneys, industrial buildings, quays, and riverside bazaars. (3)

Memories of the imperial past also intrude when Lynn visits Jack's home:

They were magnificent rooms from which six high doorways opened upon a wide verandah [sic]. From them you could see the sweep of the river embracing the smoking stacks, cranes, wharves, and warehouses of the docks. Ceiling, floor, walls, and pillars of the verandah [sic] were designed with the grace and assurance of a bygone century. (81)

But this 'big, unwieldy house' (256) no longer projects the image of British civilisation. Its 'once imposing gateway now looked shabby' (78); its 'porch, once impressive and magnificent, now its grandeur somewhat travestied by hundreds of doves nesting under the eaves' (79); its storerooms were crawling with cockroaches (257). This house no longer evokes imperial order and efficiency, as Jack's 'files stood high in his baskets' (234), while '[c]obwebs hung from the rafters, [...] Old maps of the district hung on the once cream walls, now patched with mildew' (80). And it no longer excludes the reality of India. Jack's residence is flanked on either side by 'an Indian quarter – part living houses, part bazaar, with an accumulation of filth and dilapidation' (78). Immediately following

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<sup>47</sup> See for example, Alison Sainsbury, 'Married to the Empire: The Anglo-Indian Domestic Novel', in *Writing India, 1757-1990: The Literature of British India*, ed. by Bart Moore-Gilbert (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 163-87 (pp. 176-77); George, *The Politics of Home*, pp. 49-53.

<sup>48</sup> Sainsbury, p. 177.

<sup>49</sup> For example, the home in Godden's *The River* (1946) symbolises the loss of an idyllic colonial childhood and the violence of empire (Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, pp. 104-05).



Lynn's first glimpse of Jack's house, she is confronted with India's poverty: 'Scavenging over refuse disgorged from an open dustbin, a woman and a dog picked over rotten heaps of vegetables, which stank so sourly that Lynn, catching a whiff through the window, felt sick' (78). A telling detail recalls the violence of empire: on arrival, their car nearly hits a 'dishevelled, dirty form of a boy [...] He emitted short, frantic yells like those of a wild animal, at the same time saluting Jack' (79).

Although associated with the masculine world of imperial trade and administration, the colonial home was primarily the centre of the feminine domestic sphere. But as noted by Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, it was an unstable concept, permanently in need of defence, and whilst the trope is connected with control of the imperial space, it is 'persistently haunted by the consequences of the violence upon which that control is based.'<sup>50</sup> Here Leslie updates the trope in a number of dimensions: emphasising the illusionary nature of the boundary between home and the external world; openly showing that imperial violence cannot easily be contained; and highlighting the futility of the 'civilising' mission. Signifying Britain's impending departure from India and the coming of a new political order, Jack's home is now run by his bearer and used by departing Britons who dump their furniture (82) while its interior decoration is taken over by the Bengal Public Works Department (82).

In parallel with the diminution of the colonial home as a metaphor for imperial stability, Lynn's role as the competent manager of the colonial household is invalidated too. An attempt to tackle the disorder in Jack's rooms is undone by his male servants and her dream to create a home that displays order and aesthetics – 'Everything white, and curtains the colour of lamp-lit water, yards and yards of it, falling like one of those mountain waterfalls' (375) – is never realised. As the end of the empire nears, the Englishwoman has lost her private role, managing the colonial household, as well as her public role, supporting the 'civilising' mission.

Recalling Burton's notion of the domestic space as the archive of women's memories, the trope of the rundown colonial home evokes not only a vanishing personal world, but also acts as a record of imperial history.<sup>51</sup> Lynn's nostalgic recollections of the Bihar family home signal loss, mourning and the impossibility of return:

She returned over the separated years to look back to the India she had known: the Loharya garden dreaming under the spiral of smoke above the charcoal burner's pit; the hushed psalm of the bamboo clumps by the gardener's hut; the scratch of Chunder-ji's pen as he wrote out the factory accounts in a long buff book. (3)

But the family home is connected too with an earlier anti-imperial rebellion, namely the nineteenth-century indigo riots, fictionalised by Leslie in her later novel *The Blue Devils* (1951) and by Christine Weston (1904-1989) in *Indigo* (1943).<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Hall and Rose, p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> Burton, *Dwelling*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Weston was born and raised in India in a French-British indigo family, but later moved to the United States.

Indigo cultivation in northern India dated back to the late eighteenth century when British and French planters arrived and acquired extensive landholdings. The system relied on local labourers (*ryots*), who were compelled to enter into contracts that led to life-long indebtedness. The first disturbances occurred in Bengal in 1859-60 and, although prompted by local grievances, led to fears of a second Mutiny.<sup>53</sup> In the late 1890s, the invention of synthetic dye caused exports to decline. In response, some planters switched to alternative crops, such as sugar and jute, while others went bankrupt. In 1917, Gandhi led one of the earliest *satyagraha* campaigns on behalf of the indigo workers in Bihar.<sup>54</sup> The resulting Champaran Agrarian Law (1918) improved conditions for workers, but contributed to higher costs of production, further reducing the industry's profitability.

As Leslie later recounts, her grandfather Andrew Leslie arrived in India in 1823 from Edinburgh, while his son Sheppard John Leslie founded a law firm in Calcutta, specialised in indigo business, and served as Senior Attorney of the Calcutta High Court.<sup>55</sup> In *Goat to Kali*, she fictionalises her own family connections with the Bihar indigo industry, tracing Lynn's family history, from Murray Lewes Coles, who left Aberdeen in 1824 with 'his bride Mary and his rosewood furniture' (21) and his son Ethridge, 'one of the leading planters of the district, a venerable, grey-haired patriarch' (18), to Lynn's own father, Sheppard Coles, 'who was to taste the bitter fruit of decline in the fortunes of indigo' (28). The Coles concern survives the various setbacks into the 1930s, until Sheppard's death and an earthquake mark the end of the family home and business.

A distinguishing feature of *Goat to Kali* is its nostalgic engagement with this distant past and the exploration of what Eric Hobsbawm calls the twilight zone between personal memory and history.<sup>56</sup> Accessing the twilight zone through her father's papers, Lynn recalls 'the history of a time that had gone, of a way of life that flowered for two hundred years in India, and under Gandhi's whip withered and fell apart in less than twenty years' (17). But Lynn's nostalgia is less about the impending end of British rule, and more about the history and achievements of the 'Blue Devils': 'How powerful they seemed, the feudal clans of Behar, the Blue Devils; yet her poor indigo planters were unable to withstand the meek, mystical old man in a loincloth!' (17). Abandoning her critical attitude towards those defending the continuation of imperial rule, Lynn sides with the planters, emphasising their hard work and commitment:

It was an unheard of thing in the old days for ryots of the Coles's concern to take their disputes to the local law-courts. They came instead to Murray, later to Ethridge and Sheppard, preferring the patriarchal justice of 'Coles Sahib' to the assistance of corrupt pleaders of the law-courts. Murray, Ethridge, and Sheppard Coles had dispensed justice much as Mary, Lucy, and Hannah, their wives, dosed their patients – honestly and without charge. (27)

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<sup>53</sup> John Keay, *India: A History* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), pp. 448-49.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 471. *Satyagraha* or 'truth force' refers to Gandhi's non-violent campaigns for independence.

<sup>55</sup> [Anon.], 'The Mail Box', *Chowkidar*, 4:2 (October 1985), p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914* (London: Abacus, 1994), p. 3. See also Walder, p. 2.

Lynn – or the narrator (it is unclear who is speaking at this point) – further underplays the injustices of the indigo industry, simply stating: ‘There had always been a certain amount of resentment among the ryots against the system whereby the planter insisted that a certain percentage of their land should be devoted to the plant’ (28). Moreover, Lynn fails to condemn an inherently exploitative economic system. Recalling a childhood incident when ‘Gandhi was touring the district inciting ryots to withhold taxes. Factory buildings had been burnt down and there were signs of trouble throughout Chumparan’ (36), she remembers coming face to face with a student march. Using racially inflected language, this is described as ‘a surging mass of brown faces’ (40); a ‘jumping, seething mass’ (41); ‘fanatical, shouting maniacs’ (42). Retrospectively, Lynn appears unable to appreciate the protestors’ motives: ‘They didn’t care who we were – the Coles children, and the Collector’s son. Somehow, this seemed to make the episode much worse to Lynn’ (43).

Lynn’s memories confirm Renato Rosaldo’s observation that imperialist nostalgia often operates through elegiac representations of colonial societies, ‘mak[ing] racial domination appear innocent and pure.’<sup>57</sup> Rosaldo further remarks that this nostalgia frequently takes the form of the tender memories of childhood, which, despite their benign character, act as a screen and ‘transform the responsible colonial agent into an innocent bystander.’<sup>58</sup> Lynn remembers how ‘[h]er father praised his indigo cultivators, but his greater affection was for the harvest coolies’ (24), thereby erasing the history of the indigo workers’ resistance against the industry’s injustices. Lynn’s Bihar recollections appear to disavow the exploitative practices of her forefathers and undermine her anti-imperial stance and critique of the colonial administration, discussed earlier in this chapter.

In sum, the colonial home in *Goat to Kali* can no longer hold on to its emblematic image denoting imperial stability. Leslie modifies this much-used imperial trope to create a tension between the familiar past and the unfamiliar present; between uncritical identification with a familial history of imperial paternalism and more detached observation of modern India as it seeks to cast off the imperial legacy. As a result, the novel’s criticism of the imperial project is tempered by the author’s nostalgic recollections of her own childhood and her family’s colonial past, thus recalling the ambivalence or complicity-resistance dynamic, which Gikandi associates with women’s imperial writing.<sup>59</sup>

### **Readers and Indian politics**

Thus far, I have shown how Leslie works within the tradition of the imperial novel but lends this literary category a new relevance by incorporating documentary evidence into her narrative, and by altering literary tropes that derived their meaning from the imperial ideology. In this section, I ask

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<sup>57</sup> Renato Rosaldo, ‘Imperialist Nostalgia’, *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989), 107-22 (p. 107).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>59</sup> Gikandi, p. 47.

how the 1948 reviewers understood Leslie's project, and whether they perceived any tensions between the novel's political ambitions and its narrative qualities.

Contemporary reviewers emphasised the author's intimate knowledge of Indian history and politics, her commitment to provide an impartial account, and the topical relevance of her novel. Capturing these various attributes, it was billed by its London publisher Cassell as 'brilliant and authentic.'<sup>60</sup> For some reviewers, the novel's documentary quality stood out, with the novelist Anthony Powell writing in the *TLS* that *Goat to Kali* 'deals with an interesting and melancholy subject – the circumstances of the last days of British rule in India.'<sup>61</sup> Powell further praised Leslie for 'treating her subject without the sentimentality that has so often marred books about India or Indians.'<sup>62</sup> Likewise, the *Observer* remarked that *Goat to Kali*'s background 'gives every side to the problem of British and Indian relations,' while the *Illustrated London News* observed that 'there is much less English bias than one might think from the plot.'<sup>63</sup> For a regional reviewer, it was 'a vivid and very able novel of the India of the years '41 and '42 that will most certainly arouse the interest which most of us feel in this distressful country in our own time.'<sup>64</sup> Pointing to Leslie's family connections, this critic concluded that the author had 'chosen a very vital period of which to write and she is thoroughly cognizant of the contemporary scene. Her viewpoint is praise-worthily impartial and she has told this moving story of terrorist 'tactics' with unusual understanding and competence.'<sup>65</sup> Similarly, *Britannia and Eve*, a monthly magazine aimed at middle-class women, commented that Leslie 'knows her background so well that she is moved to present an inside picture of modern India as well as a dramatic story,' adding, 'in focusing it through Lynn Coles, the girl who marries the magistrate, doubtless gives it much of herself and her own intense experience.'<sup>66</sup>

Some reviewers perceived a tension between the novel's documentary and literary qualities. Despite praise for the novel's topicality, the *TLS* was of the view that it 'leaves a good deal to be desired in the way of construction and general presentation of its story.'<sup>67</sup> The *Illustrated London News* was qualified too in its assessment, noting that *Goat to Kali* was 'written from direct experience and thoroughly well-informed, and on its journalistic level (for it does not attain to art) is very good reading.'<sup>68</sup> *Britannia and Eve* admitted that '[t]he structure may have faults but always there is the compelling interest that comes of firsthand [sic] knowledge.'<sup>69</sup> The *Observer* characterised it as

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<sup>60</sup> Adverts in *Listener*, 24 June 1948, p. 1019; *Daily Telegraph*, 25 June 1948, p. 3; and *John O'London's Weekly*, 25 June 1948, p. 303.

<sup>61</sup> Anthony Powell, 'East and West', *TLS*, 26 June 1948, p. 357.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Angela Milne, 'New Novels', *Observer*, 4 July 1948, p. 3; K. John, 'Notes for the Novel-Reader', *Illustrated London News*, 31 July 1948, p. 138.

<sup>64</sup> [Anon.], 'Terrorist India', *Kington Times*, 18 September 1948, p.5.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Trevor Allen, 'Books', *Britannia and Eve*, 37:3 (September 1948), p. 68.

<sup>67</sup> Powell, 26 June 1948, p. 357.

<sup>68</sup> John, 31 July 1948, p. 138.

<sup>69</sup> Allen, September 1948, p. 68.

‘competent, sympathetic, and on the lighter side pleasantly humorous,’ leaving open as to whether these qualities were to be applauded or regretted.<sup>70</sup>

In sum, the reviewers identified two key features I have discussed in this chapter: Leslie’s use of factual material and the dialogic nature of her narrative. The reviews further suggest that she was largely successful in her political project, even though some expressed reservations in relation to the novel’s narrative merit. Interestingly, the reviewers overlooked its social themes (marriage, domesticity and woman’s work). However, as I explain next, *Goat to Kali* deals with quintessentially middlebrow interests – gender and class – and its use of the associated tropes of marriage and domesticity suggest a strong link with the domestic middlebrow novel.

### ***Goat to Kali* and the female middlebrow**

Central to the middlebrow novel is its engagement with the interests and concerns of its middle-class, female reading public. Leslie was familiar with this audience, as prior to the publication of *Goat to Kali*, she was a regular contributor of short stories and articles to various magazines, some, but not all aimed at female readers.<sup>71</sup> She also worked for several British newspapers and magazines, and in 1939, joined the publishing firm George Newnes, as associate editor of women’s magazines.<sup>72</sup> She was later asked to edit a new weekly, suggesting that the characters of Lynn Coles and Miss Waddley are partly autobiographical.<sup>73</sup>

Leslie’s short stories of the 1940s portray women’s personal relationships during the difficult war years, invariably endorsing marriage and domesticity, as women anxiously wait for RAF pilots to return from bombing raids or anticipate the return of a husband and father after a lengthy absence as prisoner of war.<sup>74</sup> While these stories fit comfortably within the female middlebrow tradition, in *Goat to Kali*, Leslie departs from this familiar template, as she combines the novel’s colonial polemic with a debate on the opportunities (or lack of) for women in the workplace, and the perceived conflict between their professional and domestic roles. In the first instance, the novel offers a commentary on women’s presence in professions that were traditionally the preserve of men, as seen in the description of Miss Waddley:

On the staff of every magazine and newspaper there is usually a hard-working, competent woman of about thirty-five who is paid less than she is worth. She has probably worked her way up from junior typist, but will never achieve her secret and dearest wish, a key job – that of editor, or news editor, or feature editor. At most she might become an assistant editor, a position without real power and with all the hard work and lack of recognition to which she is already accustomed.  
(106)

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<sup>70</sup> Milne, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> *Indian Information*, 1 April 1941, p. 214. Leslie had published in *Britannia and Eve*, *Lilliput*, *Woman’s Journal*, *Sunday Dispatch*, *Sunday Express*, *Daily Mirror* and the *New Statesman*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> For example, Cecilie Leslie, ‘Bomber Command’, *Britannia and Eve*, 21:4 (October 1940), pp. 6-9; p.52; and Cecilie Leslie, ‘Grown-Ups Sometimes Cry’, *Britannia and Eve*, 32:2 (February 1946), pp. 9-12; pp. 51-52; p. 54.

In the event, Miss Waddley is promoted to editor, though her achievement is belittled when a colleague remarks: ‘Personally, I think she’s after a husband, [...] they say after a year without seeing a white woman, men in the East will marry anyone’ (110). Here, Leslie reworks a familiar trope of interwar romances, which as Teo Hsu-Ming observes, frequently feature a young professional Englishwoman, who enjoys India as ‘a space of romantic adventure and daring exploration’ before finding a husband.<sup>75</sup> A relatively minor character in the overall narrative, Miss Waddley is of interest as she represents the unresolved tension between conservative and progressive views on women’s professional aspirations, which as shown by Deborah Philips and Ian Haywood, would feature prominently in popular female fiction of the 1950s.<sup>76</sup>

Similarly, Lynn is presented as a successful professional artist and single woman, keen to secure employment after arriving in Calcutta and resisting a purely domestic role in the image of the Calcutta *memsahibs*, as she prefers her career ‘to any domesticated set-up’ (51). However, a more ambiguous picture emerges, as Leslie inserts a conventional marriage plot into her political novel and prompts her main character to admit that her own view of marriage has altered: ‘Every woman, Lynn decided, her eyes upon the still, moonlit water, every woman wants to be possessed by a man, even people like me’ (57). Lynn’s inner dialogue reveals further contradictions, in part conveyed through irony:

It was funny, all the same, she thought, to see the bright London advertising artist, the ex-Bloomsbury habitué, tie herself to so respectable a limb of the law as an I.C.S. officer. It was like a lady contortionist marrying the vicar. (252)

Irony also highlights the contrast between Lynn’s earlier commitment to her career and personal autonomy, and her new identity as a married woman:

After so many years of staunch feminism, Lynn relaxed, mentally eased herself against the bulwark of masculine strength, and had the sense of humour to smile at herself. [...] now I know I won’t mind being plain Mrs. Hogan, because Mr. Hogan is a darling. Maybe I’ll even take to knitting. (321)

As such, Leslie’s wry humour juxtaposes the security and stability offered by marriage and motherhood, and the stunting of mental and spiritual growth it could bring about.<sup>77</sup> This emphasis on security within marriage – accompanied by a more cynical take on romantic love – is a recurrent theme in the domestic middlebrow novel and, as suggested by both Humble and Light, first emerges as a cultural response to the horrors of World War I.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, irony in the female middlebrow frequently expresses frustrations with the constraints imposed by domesticity.<sup>79</sup> Leslie’s

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<sup>75</sup> Teo Hsu-Ming, ‘Romancing the Raj: Interracial Relations in Anglo-Indian Romance Novels’, *History of Intellectual Culture*, 4:1 (2004), 1-18 (p. 4)

<<https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/hic/article/view/68818>>.

<sup>76</sup> Deborah Philips and Ian Haywood, *Brave New Causes: Women in British Postwar Fictions* (London and Washington: Leicester University Press, 1998), pp. 5-7; pp. 18-19.

<sup>77</sup> Dowson, pp. 3-4; p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, pp. 211-15; p. 241; Light, p. 210; p. 214.

<sup>79</sup> Brown, p. 19; p. 27.

use of irony is not sustained and arguably less potent than in the earlier descriptions of Indian nationalism, thus losing some of its subversive potential. Instead, the romance mode takes over, with Lynn reflecting that ‘he alone, of all the men she had loved, gave her a feeling of security’ (252).

With Jack’s untimely death, Leslie not only foregoes the optimistic closure of the middlebrow, but also destabilises her novel’s critique of the twin ideologies of empire and domesticity. When Tara enters Jack’s home and pulls the trigger, the trope of marriage loses symbolic power, as the Englishman is no longer able to protect his family – and the empire – from anti-imperial violence. Tara’s act of nationalist resistance is undermined, however, by failing to tell the world about her revolutionary act – ‘she had forgotten to shout “Jai Hind!”’ (394) – a comic gesture undoing the heroic nature of her deed. Here, an intriguing parallel can be detected with Mulk Raj Anand’s short story *The Terrorist* (1936), which features a male Sikh terrorist, whose bomb does not go off and who forgets to utter his “Challenge.”<sup>80</sup> Additionally, Lynn’s final silent presence – ‘A door opened and an Englishwoman stood at the swing doors looking down upon the floor’ (394) – leaves the novel’s critical interrogation of women’s roles and identities unanswered. As we shall see in chapter 2, Huxley considers a similar conflict, but her female protagonist rejects marriage and domesticity, in favour of continued service in the ‘civilising’ mission of empire.

Interestingly, Leslie’s reviewers appeared uninterested in the novel’s discussion of marriage and domesticity, perhaps suggesting that they did not expect her political narrative to stage a discussion of distinctly female problems. Equally overlooked by the 1948 reviewers are the quintessentially middlebrow references to cultural taste and social class, which often express the middle-class reader’s own discomfort.<sup>81</sup> Specifically, the novel displays the middlebrow’s anxious self-reflexivity through Leslie’s digression into the world of publishing. *My Own Weekly*, Sir Benjamin’s women’s magazine, is dismissed as catering to lower-middle-class tastes, its mauve covers and paper patterns (90) giving the reader ‘a cosy feeling’ (91), as ‘the clothes suggested were not unattainably fashionable, but the sort of thing she had worn for the last ten years; the recipe for pie was the one she used, except for the bread crumbs’ (91).<sup>82</sup> *My Own Weekly* represents the illusion of an unchanging and unchallenging world: ‘the mag was not a luxury article and therefore within her means’ (91). A brief attempt to upgrade the magazine – ‘more pages, smarter fashions, and imitation art paper’ (92) – merely results in a fall in circulation and its ‘cosy mediocrity’ (92) is soon restored. Simultaneously deriding the consumers of mass-market culture and claiming a more elevated status for her implied reader, Leslie hints at the middlebrow’s anxious relationship with the popular, the latter’s commercial success a marker of mediocrity and its feminine conservatism denoting a lack of sophistication. But she expands her critique of metropolitan culture by introducing the figure of Lady

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<sup>80</sup> Mulk Raj Anand, *The Barber’s Trade Union and Other Stories* (London and Toronto: Jonathan Cape, 1945), p. 131. See also Tickell, *Terrorism*, p. 226.

<sup>81</sup> Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, p. 59; Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 327.

<sup>82</sup> Possibly based on *Woman’s Own*, published by Leslie’s employer George Newnes.

Forrest, who conceives ‘a pompous political weekly’ (92) for her husband to edit and serve as an outlet for his political energies, thus mocking what Humble calls the middlebrow’s reverential stance towards forms of highbrow literature.<sup>83</sup> Here middlebrow discourses of gender and class intersect with the liberal ideology of empire, as Lady Forrest is interested more in the steady income from ‘that ghastly rag’ (92), while Sir Benjamin’s championship of Indian nationalism is likened to his commercial success: ‘By another stroke of luck (his first was the happy blend of ingredients for women readers) he had stumbled on a formula for fame: Opinions on India’ (94).

Leslie’s use of dialogic irony and intertextuality reveals deeper tensions within post-war conservative ideologies of femininity, and between popular and middlebrow culture. Adopting the female middlebrow’s distinct comic voice, Leslie constructs a community of like-minded readers, who are attuned to the author’s humour and references and can decode its subtle irony and implied societal critique.<sup>84</sup> As the preceding discussion has shown, this narrative strategy is more effective when interrogating the fraught politics of decolonisation, and less when engaging in a debate about women’s identities. Her 1948 reviewers appear to be of the same opinion.

## Conclusion

When Clement Attlee’s government agreed in December 1946 to a timetable for India’s independence, ministers insisted on presenting the transfer of power as a voluntary and ‘magnanimous act,’ the culmination of decades of benevolent rule.<sup>85</sup> Six years later, former Indian Civil Servant Philip Mason reflected that the English could look back on the long connection with India as an achievement that could not be ignored.<sup>86</sup> Yet, as shown in this chapter, his contemporary Leslie penned a more critical account of the end of British rule in India. Despite its limitations – *Goat to Kali* cannot escape what Burton calls the ‘vestigial traces of structures of feeling that proved difficult to turn away from in one generation’ – Leslie’s narrative exposed the 1948 reader to a markedly less optimistic and altogether messier version of British colonial politics.<sup>87</sup> As we shall see in the next two chapters, her fellow authors Huxley and McMinnies would express similarly critical perspectives through their fiction.

*Goat to Kali* exemplifies the ability of the female middlebrow to capture moments of political crisis, as well as women’s changing historical circumstances. In common with the interwar political middlebrow, Leslie creates a dual political and romantic plot, with vividly drawn characters whose deep personal involvement in Indian politics gives the novel its dialogic quality. Her text reveals tensions between Westminster politicians and the British administration in India; between radical and

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<sup>83</sup> Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> Brown, pp. 2-3; p. 118.

<sup>85</sup> Darwin, ‘Memory’, p. 24. See also Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 94; Hyam, pp. 108-09.

<sup>86</sup> Philip Mason, *The Men Who Ruled India* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India, 1985) [1953-54], p. xi. Mason’s novel *The Wild Sweet Witch* (1947) paints a similarly benign picture.

<sup>87</sup> Burton, ‘End of Empire’, p. 105.



moderate Indian nationalists; between a conservative view of the ‘civilising’ mission of empire and a more liberal critique of its legacy. However, through the older tropes of the colonial home and household, a more ambivalent relationship with the imperial past emerges, suggesting a conflict between the implied author’s childhood memories of an unchanging country and her adult perceptions of India on the brink of independence. In the end, Leslie’s polyphonic novel offers neither a sustained critique nor an unequivocal apology for British rule in India.

Finally, *Goat to Kali* addresses individual anxieties that are central to the domestic middlebrow novel of the period. As I have shown, Leslie’s use of irony alongside the tropes of marriage and domesticity, registers the instability of conservative domestic ideologies. Yet here too her novel is ambivalent, as it oscillates between two competing views on women’s post-war roles and identities, and reprises the debate between conservatism and radicalism, which is routinely played out in the female middlebrow.

## CHAPTER 2: MAU MAU AND THE KENYAN EMERGENCY: ELSPETH HUXLEY, *A THING TO LOVE* (1954)

### Introduction

After the events of 1947, many British politicians were confident that they would be able to guide Britain's remaining colonies towards responsible self-government within the Commonwealth in a gradual and orderly manner.<sup>1</sup> Yet the years following British withdrawal from India saw anti-colonial uprisings in many parts of the empire, met in turn by violent counterinsurgency campaigns, which were supported by extensive propaganda efforts at home. Continuing the exploration of the novel's critical interrogation of the politics of decolonisation, this chapter discusses Elspeth Huxley's *A Thing to Love*, a fictional account of the Kenyan Emergency (1952-1960).<sup>2</sup>

Published in October 1954, *A Thing to Love* describes the spread of Mau Mau, Kenya's popular freedom movement, and its impact on relationships between European settlers and their African workers. The novel proceeds along two parallel narratives, following the Mau Mau activist Gitau, and the settlers Sam Gibson and Pat Foxley, respectively. This allows Huxley to explore a range of views on the political situation, with Sam representing white settler commitment to a multi-racial future for Kenya, albeit realised through violent repression of Mau Mau, and Pat standing for the continued belief in the Western 'civilising' mission through non-violent means. Tensions within the Kikuyu community – Kenya's largest ethnic group – are represented through the radical Gitau and his followers on the one hand, and the loyal Kikuyu chief Kimani and his son Matthew, a government official, on the other.<sup>3</sup> Depicting a moment of crisis in the history of decolonisation – Governor Evelyn Baring declared a state of emergency in October 1952 in response to mounting Mau Mau violence – *A Thing to Love*'s literary-historical interest stems from its detailed coverage of the politics of the Emergency and its efforts to depict the numerous motives of the Mau Mau movement.

Out of print today, *A Thing to Love* was well received, with 16,000 copies sold in October 1954 alone, and was selected as a Book Society Recommendation that same year.<sup>4</sup> Although attracting less scholarly attention than Huxley's autobiographical work, critics have highlighted the novel's interest in both settler and African viewpoints, whilst at the same time confirming her reputation as a spokesperson for the European settler community. David Maughan-Brown views *A Thing to Love* as exemplary of the colonial fiction which 'renders visible' the racist settler ideology.<sup>5</sup> He contends that Huxley's plot and characterisation promote the reader's assent to the settler view of

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<sup>1</sup> Hyam, p. 173; Owen, 'Decolonisation', p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> Elspeth Huxley, *A Thing to Love* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954). All references will be to this edition and will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

<sup>3</sup> Also referred to as Gikūyū. The chapter uses Huxley's spelling (Kikuyu).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Cross and Michael Perkin, *Elspeth Huxley: A Bibliography* (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1996), p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> David Maughan-Brown, *Land, Freedom and Fiction: History and Ideology in Kenya* (second edition), (London: Zed Books, 2017), p. 106.

Mau Mau and preclude any critical interrogation of either its underlying myths or the colonial government's interventions.<sup>6</sup> Lassner comments on the novel's interest in Kenya's political future, but notes that its vision of a multi-racial state is undermined by the violent depiction of Mau Mau and the inability of her European characters to let go of the 'civilising' mission.<sup>7</sup> Patricia Lorcin acknowledges the novel's efforts to present the tensions in African and European communities, as well as the violent methods employed by both, but ultimately views *A Thing to Love* as a lament for the lost tranquillity of Huxley's colonial childhood.<sup>8</sup> Lassner and Lorcin also detect elements of ambiguity in the novel's plot and characterisation, which they attribute to Huxley's own dilemmas.<sup>9</sup>

As I aim to demonstrate in this chapter, these scholars either overlook the dialogic aspect of Huxley's novel or foreground the limitations of its dialogism by focusing their attention on its primary characters. Hence, my first objective is to show that when considering the novel's myriad major and minor characters, a richer picture emerges of a text which has been reductively described as 'lurid popular fiction,' yet deals with a broad set of complex issues in more nuanced, and admittedly also more ambiguous, ways than has been acknowledged hitherto.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the synergies between Huxley's fictional and non-fictional work have attracted scant academic attention. Like many writer-journalists, Huxley brought her professional skills to her fiction, evident in her reliance on extensive research and real-life reporting.<sup>11</sup> Exploring this relationship in more detail, I will locate Huxley's novel within the broader category of the political middlebrow.

My second objective is to examine *A Thing to Love*'s narrative strategies and affinities with both the imperial and the domestic middlebrow novel. Specifically, I focus on Huxley's recurrent use of sensationalist images, which recall older tropes of horror and the exotic, seen in imperial adventure fiction. I ask whether this sensationalist imagery, also present in the metropolitan media and Huxley's own journalistic writing, undermines her efforts to represent the viewpoints of the various participants in the conflict. I also consider how suspense and resolution, familiar elements of the domestic middlebrow, affect the documentary quality of her novel.

My third objective is to discuss the reception of *A Thing to Love*. Observing that Huxley's contemporary reviewers were impressed with the novel's documentary quality and its rich characterisation, I study the response to Huxley's critique of government policy and ask whether reviewers perceived any tensions between the novel's political ambitions and its stylistic qualities. Finally, I reflect on its inconclusive ending, considering the middlebrow reader's desire for narrative closure.

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<sup>6</sup> Maughan-Brown, p. 107; p. 113; p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, pp. 153-57.

<sup>8</sup> Lorcin, pp. 166-68.

<sup>9</sup> Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, p. 153; Lorcin, p. 166.

<sup>10</sup> Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2019), p. 396.

<sup>11</sup> As an example, Huxley took extensive notes during her 1953 trip to Kenya. Bodleian Library, MS notebook labelled 'Mau Mau 1953.'

## **Elspeth Huxley and the Kenyan Emergency**

Huxley started collecting material for her Mau Mau novel during a three-month visit to Kenya between October and December 1953. Although she found it difficult to accept that the Kikuyu servants on her mother's farm had been anything but loyal, she heard first-hand accounts of Mau Mau aggression when visiting farmers in one of the Kikuyu reserves.<sup>12</sup> She also met with government officials, including Governor Baring, the military commander General George Erskine and the settlers' spokesman Michael Blundell. This commitment to field research – during her trip, Huxley visited Government House, settler homesteads and a Mau Mau detention camp – distinguishes her journalistic writing from contemporary settler accounts, which tend to take the form of personal recollections and are typically more one-sided in their coverage of the Emergency.<sup>13</sup>

Europeans had started to arrive in Kenya in the early 1900s, attracted by the fertile farming lands in the Rift valley, which they perceived as 'empty,' and which would become known as the 'White Highlands.'<sup>14</sup> Kenya's indigenous inhabitants (such as the Kikuyu farmers and Maasai herdsmen) were either forced into native reserves or found employ as squatters on white homesteads. By the 1920s, the first signs of rebellion became visible, with Kikuyu leaders in particular expressing dissatisfaction with their lack of political representation and the loss of land. Conservative in their politics at first, in the 1930s a more militant voice emerged, with a younger generation clamouring for accelerated action. They took up the case of Kikuyu evicted from European farms, as well as the urban poor, and their leaders would later become principals in the Mau Mau movement. The origin of the term Mau Mau is disputed though. Some historians argue that it was used only by the British in Kenya and does not feature in the Kikuyu language.<sup>15</sup> Others write that its meaning was 'greedy eating,' with loyal Kikuyu using the term to denote the radical element in Kikuyu politics and the perceived lack of discipline and corruption of young militants.<sup>16</sup>

After World War Two, Kikuyu protests escalated, with land reform and urban poverty spurring the activities of several groupings, including the Kenyan African Union (KAU), led by Jomo Kenyatta. Their ranks were swelled by Kikuyu soldiers returning from service in the British army, who brought greater awareness of nationalist movements elsewhere, and their own lack of social and

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<sup>12</sup> C. S. Nicholls, *Elspeth Huxley: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 2003), pp. 243-44.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Cherry Lander, *My Kenya Acres: A Woman Farms in Mau Mau Country* (1957).

<sup>14</sup> This section draws on: David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Phoenix, 2006); Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Frederic Cooper, 'Mau Mau and the Discourses of Decolonization', in *Journal of African History*, 29:2 (1988), 313-20; Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014); Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (London: Vintage, 2023); John Lonsdale, 'Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya', *Journal of African History*, 31 (1990), 393-421; John Lonsdale, 'Authority, Gender and Violence: The War within Mau Mau's Fight for Land and Freedom', in *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, ed. by E.S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (Nairobi and Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), pp. 46-75.

<sup>15</sup> Elkins, *Gulag*, p. 380; Maughan-Brown, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Branch, pp. 22-23; Lonsdale, 'Authority', p. 60.

economic status.<sup>17</sup> Although Mau Mau was never a centralised movement, its various groups and leaders consistently adhered to the demand for land and freedom, advocated the use of violence and relied on an oath of unity. The use of oaths intensified from 1950 onwards and many Kikuyus were pressured into paying oath fees to protect their lives. In these early years, Mau Mau's activities ranged from arson attacks on European farms and maiming of their livestock to assassinations of loyalist Africans.

In October 1952, Governor Baring declared a state of emergency and brought in additional troops from neighbouring colonies. Later that month, Kenyatta and several fellow nationalist leaders were arrested. Others escaped and fled Nairobi to continue Mau Mau's fight from the forest, forming the Land and Freedom Army.<sup>18</sup> Soon, large-scale 'screenings' of Kikuyu suspects began, while new emergency measures introduced collective punishments, the seizure of property and the removal of suspected Kikuyu squatters, prolonged jail sentences and the death penalty for oath administrators.

In this climate of violence and unrest, Kenya's white settlers became increasingly anxious, even as raids on settler homesteads were sporadic. A cluster of attacks between October 1952 and July 1953 further served to consolidate Mau Mau's reputation as 'cold-blooded savagery.'<sup>19</sup> The uprising took, however, a terrible toll on the Kikuyu population, as many Mau Mau attacks were aimed at loyalist chiefs and the Kikuyu-led Home Guards.<sup>20</sup> By July 1953, attacks on white settlers had become less frequent, in part due to the strengthening of the Kikuyu Home Guard, in part because settlers had become better at defending themselves, including by forming their own vigilante groups.

*A Thing to Love* covers the early years of the Emergency. At the beginning of the novel, increased attacks on local farms are fuelling settler anxiety, with Pat and her family worrying about their own safety and accusing the colonial government of inaction:

Everyone knew about Mau Mau, it was gaining strength everywhere and the Administration were said to be alarmed and to have warned the heads of the Government. But nothing was done. The official view seemed to be that it had all been exaggerated; movements like this cropped up from time to time, full of sound and fury but not to be taken too seriously. (63-64)

When their neighbour Piet Hendriks's cattle are mutilated and left to die, the latter vows revenge, having lost confidence in the colonial government's ability to maintain law and order. Meanwhile Pat is increasingly concerned that the family's trusted servants are not telling the truth. Her fears are crystallised when her parents are murdered, with the assistance of the farm's Kikuyu headman Raphaelo and the cook Karioki.

In the parallel plot, the Mau Mau activist Gitau joins his fellow members of the 'Council of Nine' (45) and their 'Spokesman' (44) in Nairobi to plan the conspiracy's campaign, which is to

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<sup>17</sup> Branch, p. 7; Elkins, *Gulag*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>18</sup> Elkins, *Gulag*, p. 361; Maughan-Brown, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, *Histories*, p. 87.

<sup>20</sup> Anderson estimates that 32 Europeans died during the Emergency, compared to 12,000 Africans according to official reports, and possibly over 20,000, when including those who went missing (*ibid.*, p. 4).

culminate in the ‘night of the long knives, when almost every European in the country was to die’ (55). Gitau is also the mastermind behind the cattle raids and organiser of Mau Mau oathing ceremonies. After the murder of Chief Kumani, targeted because of his cooperation with the colonial government and his refusal to join the movement, Gitau goes into hiding in the forest, where he is tracked by Sam and his Home Guard.

There is no romantic resolution in this novel, as Pat resists Sam’s advances and his vision of a shared future building his farm. As the narrative closes, Pat’s main concern is with the wounded Matthew, who has been tortured by Gitau after he refused to give up his Christian faith and take the Mau Mau oath. Equally, there is no political resolution, as Gitau is killed and the narrative abandons his fellow activists, focusing instead on Sam’s Home Guard, who, incompetently assisted by British conscripts, track Gitau through the forest. Although Sam fires the fatal shot, it is the local tracker, who ‘thrusting his recovered spear deep into the stomach of the bearded corpse, said with infinite contempt: “That is Gitau”’ (248).

Combining fact and fiction, Huxley constructs a multi-plot and multi-character novel, which conveys the complexity of the Kenyan conflict to her Western readers, producing what Daniel Branch calls a ‘patchwork of local narratives stitched untidily together by an unequally distributed fear and lived experience of violence.’<sup>21</sup> This patchwork narrative connects the anti-colonial campaign prepared by Gitau and the Council of Nine; colonial repression represented by Piet, Sam and the Kikuyu Home Guard; familial and tribal tensions involving Chief Kimani and his sons; and uneasy alliances between the Foxleys’ labourers and local Mau Mau activists. Huxley herself is said to have commented that she viewed *A Thing to Love* as ‘a novel, not a treatise [...] an imaginative reconstruction of an existing situation intended to show how the Mau Mau movement has affected the lives of many people, black and white, in Kenya.’<sup>22</sup>

What also transpires in both her journalism and her fiction is her deep interest in the people affected by the conflict, European and African.<sup>23</sup> In the next two sections, I examine the synergies between her fiction and non-fiction, and question whether previous characterisations of her novel as promoting the settler stance can be maintained. I also reflect on the significance of Huxley’s work within the historiography of the Kenyan Emergency.

### ***A Thing to Love* and the representation of Mau Mau**

Huxley’s reports on the Emergency and her novel fed into an active debate conducted in the pages of the metropolitan press. Mau Mau was frequently front-page news, with gruesome images used as

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<sup>21</sup> Branch, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in a review by H. R. Tate in *African Affairs*, 54 (January 1955), pp. 67-69 (p. 69). I could not find the original quote.

<sup>23</sup> Additionally, her non-fiction covers the concerns of the Asian community in Kenya. For example, ‘Developments in Kenya’, *Time and Tide*, 13 March 1954, p. 325; ‘The Gamble that Failed’, *Time and Tide*, 17 April 1954, pp. 501-02.

evidence of its primitive savagery and threat to white families.<sup>24</sup> According to Susan Carruthers, public fascination with Mau Mau's oath-taking ceremonies was seized upon by government officials to detract attention from possible links with genuine political or economic grievances.<sup>25</sup> Media stories supported an official narrative, which attributed colonial violence to the colonised, overlooking the violent means employed in British counterinsurgency.<sup>26</sup> Even outspoken anti-colonial critics such as the Labour MP Fenner Brockway did not contest Mau Mau's violence and frequently invoked their bestiality in speeches and pamphlets, although he urged the British government to consider the underlying causes of the insurgency, particularly the land issue.<sup>27</sup> Despite a high degree of consensus – even the liberal *Manchester Guardian* and the *New Statesman and Nation* described the uprising as a manifestation of African savagery, requiring robust government intervention – the British press was less inclined to condone the use of repressive policies and excessive military force.<sup>28</sup>

Writing in the British press, Huxley too describes Mau Mau as a terrorist organisation, and she deplores its deep hatred of Westerners, and its use of torture and killings.<sup>29</sup> When referring to its activities as 'a reversion to barbarism' and its oath-taking ceremonies as 'disgusting and barbaric,' with 'such acts of bestiality (in its true sense) and perversion that many doubt whether these men and women can ever again take their places as decent members of a civilized society,' she replicates the discourse used by the settlers and re-deployed in the metropolitan press.<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere she writes: 'Details are never published; they are considered too revolting and indeed the most extraordinary perversions have been introduced.'<sup>31</sup> She also echoes settler opinions in her criticism of British justice, which she views as too lenient for 'raw, uncivilized Africa' and partly responsible for creating a highly inflammable situation and 'a happy hunting-ground for agitators of all kinds, including Communists.'<sup>32</sup>

But Huxley also recognises the need for land reform and meaningful employment for young Kikuyu, as well as the devastating impact of crumbling social structures, which she attributes to the abrupt encounter with Western modernity.<sup>33</sup> In particular, she highlights the loss of tribal order and customs, as the elder Kikuyu no longer command the respect of younger and more educated men, who

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<sup>24</sup> Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 121-22; Joanna Lewis, "'Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a Mau Mau: The British Popular Press and the Demoralization of Empire', in *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, ed. by E.S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (eds) (Nairobi and Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), pp. 227-50 (pp. 230-32); Carruthers, p. 128; Elkins, *Gulag*, pp. 307-08.

<sup>25</sup> Carruthers, pp. 156-59. See also Elkins, *Gulag*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>26</sup> Carruthers, pp. 156-59; Webster, *Englishness*, p. 120.

<sup>27</sup> Gopal, pp. 408-14; Maughan-Brown, p. 159.

<sup>28</sup> Carruthers, pp. 180-81; Lewis, 'Daddy', pp. 239-41; Maughan-Brown, p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Lion Needs the Jungle', *Time and Tide*, 11 October 1952, p. 1159; 'The Roots of Mau Mau', *Time and Tide*, 15 November 1952, pp. 1321-22.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1321; 'Kenya Screening', *Time and Tide*, 26 December 1953, p. 1696.

<sup>31</sup> 'The Kenya Scene – I: A Raid against Mau Mau', *Time and Tide*, 28 November 1953, p. 1539.

<sup>32</sup> 'Unrest and Crime in Kenya', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 September 1952, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Lion Needs the Jungle', pp. 1159-60; 'The Roots of Mau Mau', pp. 1321-22; 'The Kenya Scene – II', *Time and Tide*, 5 December 1953, pp. 1569-70.

turn to Mau Mau instead, seeking both leadership and excitement.<sup>34</sup> ‘The tribal organism,’ she writes, has been ‘wrenched from its setting, adrift, disorganized, [and] has fallen an easy prey to a spiritual cancer deeply rooted in the tissues of superstition which underly the human mind.’<sup>35</sup> Associating Mau Mau’s practices with superstition and paganism, and recalling the Western struggle between Christianity and medieval witchcraft, she reveals, however, her unshaken belief in Western superiority.<sup>36</sup> She also observes that Kikuyu women, uneducated and suffering from a loss in status and power, play a key role in supplying Mau Mau rebels in the forests, hiding fugitives, collecting money, and betraying their own relatives, while they ‘watch for the return of Jomo, their saviour.’<sup>37</sup>

The historians John Lonsdale and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo write that the history of Mau Mau is ‘a story without end,’ in part because aspects of it remain obscured, in part because nationalism rarely admits a single explanation.<sup>38</sup> Huxley’s media reports are part of this multi-faceted history and deserve greater scholarly interest, both as an input into her fictional writing and in their own right. But, despite her efforts to present the views of a wide range of interlocutors and her interest in the deeper causes of the Mau Mau movement, Huxley’s journalism does not escape the stereotypical portrayal of an ‘atavistic reversion to primitive savagery.’<sup>39</sup> As we shall see next, neither does her fiction.

In the first instance, Huxley firmly associates Mau Mau with Kenyan nationalism. Gitau believes his mission is to ‘help his people free themselves from the bonds of ignorance and imperialism’ (54), while George Rutinu, described as a famous politician and ‘the most important member of the Council of Nine’ (45), is conscious of the need to ‘unite his people in a great revolt against that smug superiority, that intolerable arrogance’ (48). In contrast, Chief Kumani admits to serving the Europeans because ‘it is better to serve the strong than to argue with them, because a country without order is like a man without a head’ (173). His eldest son, Joshua Kumani, represents a younger generation no longer willing to follow their elders and work on their lands, and accuses the older Kikuyu leaders of being too passive. His eye on a future role in politics, Joshua vows to ‘abandon the voice of the chicken and speak with the voice of the gun’ (55).

Huxley further links Mau Mau with the broader anti-colonial movement. Gitau reports back from his European conference that ‘he had found a very sympathetic audience. Italians, Indians, West

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Unrest and Crime in Kenya’, p. 6; ‘The Roots of Mau Mau’, pp. 1321-22; ‘The Kenya Scene – II’, pp. 1569-70.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1570.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> ‘The Kenya Scene – I’, p. 1540.

<sup>38</sup> John Lonsdale and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, ‘Introduction’, in *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, ed. by E.S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (Nairobi and Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), pp. 1-7 (pp. 5-6).

<sup>39</sup> Carruthers, p. 157.



Africans, Chinese, Egyptians and many people of many other races had listened, applauded and expressed fraternal solidarity' (54).<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Rutinu believes that:

It has been done in India, in Burma and in many other countries and it could be done here, there could be freedom, and the Europeans made into servants and not masters of a Government controlled by Africans. Only the Kikuyu could bring that off in Kenya, for only the Kikuyu had the intelligence, the courage and the unity to right all these wrongs. (48)

Taking their inspiration from Malayan jungle insurgents, the Council of Nine agrees to put in place a scheme to send guerrilla fighters into the forest, raid homesteads and force the Europeans to give up their farms, so 'at last the whole of Kenya would belong to the Kikuyu, who, as liberators, would be able to command the other tribes' (159-60).

While much of the later academic (and public) debate has focused on the British unwillingness to see Mau Mau as anything other than a barbaric movement, in her novel, Huxley presents a more complex picture, as she attempts to capture the diverse African responses to Mau Mau practices. On the one hand, she reminds the reader of the origins of the oath, with Chief Kumani bemoaning the movement's subversion of a tribal custom:

When I was a boy, if a man ate an oath, which was seldom, he did it publicly and after he had gained permission from the elders; [...] Now the oath is eaten in secret places in the darkness, women may see it and many things are done that have no part whatever in our customs. (120)

Meanwhile, his son Matthew fears that the oaths administrators will bring more violence:

Now the emergency had come, a lot of people had been arrested and the whole country turned upside down. [...] The leaders of the conspiracy would leave Nairobi and bring their evil and their wild, intoxicating notions with them like an infection, to be spread far and wide. (119)

On the other hand, she employs the voice of Gitau to hint at its transformation into an effective political tool. 'There is to be a new oath' (85), Gitau declares, '[t]his oath is for the higher people, the commanders, those chosen by the Spokesman. It will carry with it greater tasks and greater dangers, and those who've taken it will have greater rewards.'(85). Whereas Huxley's journalistic writings emphasise the brutality and largely mythical depravity of Mau Mau oathing ceremonies, here she puts more weight on its political use and the unease of loyal Kikuyu with the transgression of tribal customs. Later in the narrative, she returns to the discourse of primitivism, as she reports on Gitau's brutal attack on Matthew – 'This is the knife that cut out the eyes of Zachariah. Now it will cut something else from you' (233) – suggesting that despite her genuine interest in the movement's political base, she cannot escape the period's dominant sensationalist discourse.

A recurrent topic in her media reports, Huxley foregrounds the land issue through the Kikuyu labourers. Hoping to 'cultivate their shambas as they had in ancient days' (81), Raphaelo and Karioki

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<sup>40</sup> Connections between anti-colonial activists across the British Empire had been forged through periodic conferences. For example, in 1945, Kenyatta and several Kikuyu delegates attended the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester (Gopal, p. 390).

have pledged their life savings towards the purchase of the Foxley farm after the Europeans are driven out but become the victims of unscrupulous Nairobi-based Mau Mau activists. Huxley further conveys Raphaelo's despair at having participated in the killing of the Foxleys:

When he had eaten the first oath, he had believed that the old peace and customs of the Kikuyu would be restored, that the days of being told do this, go there, stop that, would end, that he would be his own master and there would be no more taxes; for his father had never paid taxes before the Europeans came, nor his father before him, and his grandfather had grown rich and been respected by his sons.

But it seemed that he had listened only to lies. (212-13)

Through Raphaelo's lament, Huxley links the loss of land and tribal customs on the one hand, and Mau Mau exploitation of poor and landless Kikuyu on the other, without, however, doubting the legitimacy of the settlers' presence. There is a hint at colonial violence too, as Raphaelo is arrested by a European policeman, whose face is 'hard, like stone, and cold with hatred' (216), and realises that his journey will end 'at a rope's end' (216).

When the Spokesman asserts that 'their conspiracy could not possibly succeed unless the women nourished it. Their task would be to feed the men who, when the time came, would launch the attack, to shelter the officials and eject the weaklings' (52), Huxley repeats the claims made in her reports on the role of Kikuyu women in the movement. But here she is interested more in their support for the insurgency, and less in their inferior social status. Her named female characters – Martha, Matthew's wife, and the widow Njeri, a relative of the Spokesman – are relatively well-off, unlike the peasant women 'bent low under heavy loads of produce' (123).<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, her characterisation of the women is ambiguous, with Martha presented as a treacherous individual, who passes on the names of loyal Kikuyu and is indirectly responsible for the death of Chief Kimani. Martha also represents the breakdown of Kikuyu society and the hopes invested in Mau Mau men, who 'would bring back the ancient strength and customs of the tribe, and the power of the women over men who had not been emasculated by the writing on the paper and the white man's word' (162). In contrast, Huxley creates a more sympathetic character in the widow Njeri, described as a conciliatory presence on the Council of Nine, willing to defy the Spokesman, while acting as 'a sounding-board, a lesser spokesman for those who dared not defy their leader openly. She could put their feelings into words, without obliging him to admit that he was wrong' (57).

Both women are given limited political agency though. Njeri is silent when in a later scene, Gitau and the Council of Nine decide to form a guerrilla army in the forest and employ the women to carry food and money to the fighters, with Martha as their leader (160). Meanwhile, Martha's actions are described as being motivated by her dislike of her husband, who 'prayed to the God of the Christians and did the white man's work' (162), and her passion for Gitau 'who'd proved his manhood in the blood of another as warriors used to do' (162). Although her fictional female

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<sup>41</sup> Similar imagery is used in 'The Kenya Scene – I', p. 1539.

characters represent the viewpoints recorded in her journalism, Huxley downplays any positive contribution they might make to the movement. Moreover, the novel's critical attitude towards their support for Mau Mau overshadows Huxley's broader humanitarian interest in women's health and education.

Huxley's novel and her reporting can be read productively in relation to the historiography of Mau Mau and its contribution to the ending of colonial rule. Most historians now agree to view Mau Mau as a nationalist movement, which captured discontent with British colonial practices and racism.<sup>42</sup> Recent scholarship also places greater weight on the movement's link with earlier African nationalism, the participation of Kenya's other tribes and Mau Mau's role in precipitating independence, even if most of its participants (squatters and forest fighters) never acquired any land and its leaders were absent from official independence negotiations.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, Odhiambo detects seven different theses explaining Kenyan nationalism, some attributing a key role to the people (including the Mau Mau forest fighters), others privileging the contributions of a more moderate Kenyan elite.<sup>44</sup> To varying degrees, these aspects are covered in Huxley's writing of the period. Her views on Mau Mau are, however, inconsistent, veering between a genuine effort to understand its economic and social drivers, and uncritical descriptions of its 'barbaric' methods.

### ***A Thing to Love and Emergency politics***

In recent years, historians have also revisited the role of the colonial state, and their insights expose the limits of Huxley's criticism, both in her novel and her journalism. Working with newly available court records, David Anderson has brought to life the various counterinsurgency measures adopted by the British, including the use of screenings, court hearings, detention camps, resettlement villages and hangings. Meanwhile, Caroline Elkins relies on oral testimonies from detention camp survivors to document the violent methods employed by British military and security forces, while Branch documents the role of loyalist Kikuyu and their Home Guard in defeating Mau Mau and argues against reducing the conflict to a struggle between coloniser and colonised.<sup>45</sup>

In her journalistic writing, Huxley is critical of ongoing local and metropolitan government efforts to stem the insurrection and advocates more targeted action, including the closure of schools and the detention of suspect Kikuyu leaders.<sup>46</sup> She critiques the Colonial Office, who in her view, is

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<sup>42</sup> For example, Bruce J. Berman, 'Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernity: The Paradox of Mau Mau', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25:2 (1991), 181-206; Joanna Lewis, 'Nasty, Brutish and in Shorts? British Colonial Rule, Violence and the Historians of Mau Mau', *The Round Table*, 96:389 (2007), 201-23; Lonsdale and Odhiambo, 'Introduction', pp. 5-6; Maughan-Brown, pp. 20-21.

<sup>43</sup> Berman, p. 183; p. 193; Branch, pp. 11-16; Lewis, *Nasty*, pp. 207-09; Lonsdale and Odhiambo, 'Introduction', pp. 3-5.

<sup>44</sup> E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, 'Matunda ya Uhuru: Fruits of Independence: Seven Theses on Nationalism in Kenya', in *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, ed. by E.S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (Nairobi and Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), pp. 37-45.

<sup>45</sup> Branch, p. xii.

<sup>46</sup> 'The Roots of Mau Mau', p. 1322; 'Remedies for Kenya', *Time and Tide*, 31 January 1953, p. 133-34.

concerned more with placating Westminster MPs and the London media, and less with protecting loyal Africans.<sup>47</sup> Instead, she backs greater coordination of local counterinsurgency efforts and improved information sharing.<sup>48</sup> In June 1953, she hopes that General Erskine will prove to be a ‘Templer of Kenya.’<sup>49</sup> A few months later, she writes that military action alone is insufficient and must be complemented with psychological warfare – an appeal to ‘mind and heart.’<sup>50</sup> When the British government steps up its counterinsurgency efforts in late 1953, she comments positively on the Home Guard and the newly erected detention camps, although she remarks that ‘somehow or other the minds and hearts of these Kikuyu must be reached and no one yet knows how it is to be done.’<sup>51</sup> She further expresses reservations at plans to round up unemployed Kikuyu men in Nairobi, pointing out that they are likely to join the ranks of Mau Mau in the forests: ‘You cannot dump human beings as if they were loads of refuse and expect them to become law-abiding citizens.’<sup>52</sup>

Huxley is concerned too about the plight of loyal Kikuyu and their government-appointed chiefs, who are the main victims of Mau Mau aggression, their homesteads burned down by armed gangs, their wives and children disembowelled.<sup>53</sup> She is mindful of metropolitan criticism that local security forces and the Home Guard are using excessive force – ‘A pause: another shot: a distant scream. (Home Guards are seldom squeamish.)’ – and admits that the latter are often driven by a desire for revenge.<sup>54</sup> Visiting a screening camp, she reflects on the challenges of obtaining reliable information and admits to rumours of beatings.<sup>55</sup> And she is critical of African police forces, reporting that many accept bribes from Mau Mau, and as a result are distrusted and feared by ordinary Africans.<sup>56</sup>

Mirroring her journalistic writing, Huxley’s novel endorses metropolitan criticism of the excessive army and police force on the ground, while supporting the broad outline of the counterinsurgency response. Recognising this tension allows for a more nuanced assessment of Huxley’s literary project. Close examination of her European characters undermines Maughan-Brown’s claim that Huxley, in common with other colonial writers (such as M. M. Kaye and Robert Ruark), relies on ‘easily identifiable categories of spokesmen,’ who enjoy authorial support and whose pro-settler views are likely to be trusted by the Western reader.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> ‘Confusion in Kenya’, *Time and Tide*, 18 April 1953, pp. 502-03.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*; ‘General Erskine’s Problems’, *Time and Tide*, 13 June 1953, pp. 778-79.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 778. Templer led the counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya between 1952 and 1954 (see chapter 3).

<sup>50</sup> ‘Notes from Nairobi’, *Time and Tide*, 31 October 1953, pp. 1416-17.

<sup>51</sup> ‘The Kenya Scene – II’, p. 1569.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Nairobi Balance Sheet’, *Time and Tide*, 10 October 1953, pp. 1299.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Confusion in Kenya’, p. 502; ‘General Erskine’s Problems’, p. 778.

<sup>54</sup> ‘The Kenya Scene – I’, pp. 1539-40.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Kenya Screening’, pp. 1695-96.

<sup>56</sup> ‘The Kenya Scene: Summing up’, *Time and Tide*, 23 January 1954, p. 107.

<sup>57</sup> Maughan-Brown, p. 129. Ruark was an American journalist and author of the bestselling Mau Mau novel *Something of Value* (1955); Kaye was a British writer, best known for her India-based novels *Shadow of the Moon* (1957) and *The Far Pavilions* (1978). See also footnote 98.

In the first instance, Huxley foregrounds the violence of the British counterinsurgency response in the encounter of Sam and the English army officer Ronald Thwaites. For the latter, the insurgency is '[a] silly sort of war [...] beating up these savages' (241). 'Why not clear out altogether,' he mutters, 'and leave them to it. Then if they liked to gouge each other's eyes out and slit open the bellies of pregnant women they could do it to their heart's content' (241). Thwaites resents the settlers' intransigence – 'It was the settlers who had got everyone into this bloody mess, first by coming here at all and then by insisting on staying' (241) – and is of the opinion that they should all 'clear out and go and farm somewhere civilised if they wanted to, like Essex. Or there was always Australia' (241). For Sam though, the chase through the forest is more than a simple military exercise, but a quest for revenge, shared with his chief tracker, who too had joined 'for motives of revenge, [...] after the massacre of a son and the son's family' (238). Yet, in the eyes of the National Service conscripts, Sam admits, 'these terrorists were just a nasty bunch of wogs, not Gitau the murderer and sadist with his gang of desperate and depraved men' (244). Although Sam has put his trust in the local Home Guard, he too epitomises the violence of empire.

The character of Pat represents further unresolved tensions. Critics have associated Pat with Huxley, noting that Pat's (and Huxley's) loyalties are ultimately with the coloniser.<sup>58</sup> This view lacks nuance, I suggest, as Pat embodies both settler and metropolitan anxieties. With regards to the former, she sadly considers that '[a]ll her father had ever wanted was to be left alone to better his land and his animals. Why, then, had he and Mamie, who had never harmed a soul, been hurled into that pit of pain and terror?' (218). But her nostalgic reflections – typically conveyed through indirect speech – also centre on the futility of violent action: 'a conspiracy founded on hatred by seekers after power, and built up by intimidation, couldn't be the answer' (64). Pat is critical too of the aggressive stance taken by Piet and the other settlers: 'Hatred was catching' (91). After her parents' murder, she distances herself from the settlers' view that the guilty servants should be hanged: 'It would be better news if we could understand what had got into them and how to cure it. Hanging people doesn't get you very far' (222). Arguably, it is through the character of Pat that Huxley comes closest to acknowledging metropolitan criticism of the counterinsurgency response. Additionally, I do not subscribe to Maughan-Brown's view of Pat as 'a convenient device whereby Huxley can make racists assertions through the mouth of a character who has been built up to have a reputation for liberalism.'<sup>59</sup> Rather I would argue that Pat is an essential contributor to the multi-voiced dialogue Huxley constructs.

More generally, this and the previous section have highlighted the role of imagined dialogue in bringing to life the different viewpoints Huxley had also explored in her media reports. Some of Huxley's characters replicate the settler discourse, both in their anger at Mau Mau's violence and their

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<sup>58</sup> Lorcin, p. 166; Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, p. 156.

<sup>59</sup> Maughan-Brown, p. 129. The limitations of Pat's character are recognised too by Lassner (*Colonial Strangers*, p. 156) and Lorcin (p. 166).

demands for a strong government response, which at times is indistinguishable from their desire for revenge. These voices also confirm the official British view of Mau Mau as a barbaric organisation, whose motives were deemed unrelated to Britain's colonial presence. Other characters contest the settler narrative, and their voices draw the reader's attention to the nationalist basis for the Mau Mau uprising, the entrenched views of Western settlers and the violence employed by local security forces. It is worth noting though that neither Pat, nor any of the other European characters refer to the use of screenings and torture, detention camps or compulsory resettlement, which featured in Huxley's articles towards the end of 1953.

Importantly, whereas earlier critics single out the novel's central protagonists and quote their most salient sayings, *A Thing to Love* has over thirty named characters, of which a third are members of the settler community and another third have direct connections with Mau Mau, either locally or in Nairobi. Hence, by creating a chorus of dissenting voices, Huxley exposes the contested nature of Britain's colonial politics and the fractures within African society as she saw them. Her polyphonic narrative also demonstrates that both settler and African opinions were more diverse than believed in some quarters.

Whilst her journalistic writing is often explicit in its endorsement of a particular viewpoint (such as her critique of Mau Mau oath-taking or her support for the Home Guard), in the novel she introduces significant ambiguity, as the exchanges between her characters and the juxtaposition of separate conversations combine to produce an account that is aligned to no single political view. Furthermore, as the different voices compete loudly with one another, Huxley as author recedes into the background, in contrast to her journalistic writings, where her distinctive personal voice frames and directs her analysis of the Emergency. Additional ambiguity arises from her use of indirect speech to transmit the inner thoughts and conflicts of her characters, producing the double-voiced speech, also seen in *Goat to Kali*.

In common with Leslie, Huxley combines careful documentation of external events with richly drawn characters, representing different political affiliations. Equally, *A Thing to Love* illustrates the ability of the political middlebrow to mount a political debate within the confines of the fictional text. Whereas Leslie employs the comic mode to write her dialogical novel, Huxley relies heavily on the interactions between her numerous characters, often moving swiftly from one set of characters to another, thus bringing to life the different viewpoints she had also explored in her media reports. Moreover, her novel's polemical character stems as much from her journalistic commitment to evidence-based research, as from the expression of her own personal dilemmas, which according to Lassner and Lorcin produce the ambiguity of her narrative.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, due attention to the manner in which Huxley's novel straddles the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction can shed further light

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<sup>60</sup> Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, p. 153; Lorcin, p. 166.

on the challenges experienced by the author, who is both eyewitness to the events accompanying the dismantling of the empire and curator of her own personal history.<sup>61</sup>

### Readers and the Kenyan Emergency

To most contemporary reviewers, Huxley was likely to be well known for her earlier writings on Africa. When introducing her latest novel to their readers, they invariably referred to her deep understanding of the Kenyan scene. The reviewer in *Time and Tide* was of the opinion that Huxley had written ‘a completely accurate description of the development of the Mau Mau conspiracy with its complex organization, its obscene ritual and its ghastly handiwork.’<sup>62</sup> Commenting on the role of the novelist as a trusted informant, the reviewer remarked: ‘Anyone who does not know Kenya but who wishes to understand it, will get a far better picture from this book than he will from reading a hundred official publications.’<sup>63</sup> The *Sunday Times* praised Huxley’s ‘carefully balanced picture,’ adding that her treatment of the early days of Mau Mau has ‘a kind of hopelessness’ as it deals with ‘the fading of the colonial dream.’<sup>64</sup> The *TLS* applauded Huxley’s effort to use her fiction ‘to fill in the background to newspaper reports and articles on the Mau Mau terrorists’ and opined that the novel made an important contribution to the literature on Mau Mau.<sup>65</sup>

No one can read it without a vivid understanding of what this peculiarly revolting distortion of tribal magic for political ends has meant to European settlers and those Africans who believe the future of their country is best served by peaceful coexistence.<sup>66</sup>

Later, such claims would be contested by the writer Chinua Achebe and the critic Micere Githae-Mugo, with the former stating that Huxley was guilty of ‘consider[ing] herself an African,’ and the latter dismissing her portrayal of black characters: ‘[she] tends to assume that she can explain them without difficulties.’<sup>67</sup>

When the novelist-poet Stevie Smith summarised the novel as ‘a fair account, well informed and vivid,’ she alluded to the challenge of creating an engaging narrative of a distant political conflict.<sup>68</sup> In this regard, the *New Statesman and Nation* believed that Huxley’s attempt to dramatise current events in Kenya had failed, and attributed this to her inability to capture the ‘spirit in Mau Mau’ and its leaders: ‘at the end, though we have learnt a great deal that is valuable about the organisation of Mau Mau, as to why it has the sickening form it has, we remain as much in the dark as

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<sup>61</sup> Burton, *Dwelling*, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> C. J. M. Alport, ‘Country of the Mau’, *Time and Tide*, 23 October 1954, p. 1425.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> J. W. Lambert, ‘The Week’s Fiction’, *Sunday Times*, 10 October 1954, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Arthur Calder-Marshall, ‘African Viewpoints’, *TLS*, 29 October 1954, p. 685.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2003), p. 57; Micere Githae-Mugo, *Visions of Africa: The Fiction of Chinua Achebe, Margaret Laurence, Elspeth Huxley and Ngugi wa Thiong’o* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978), p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> Stevie Smith, ‘New Novels’, *Observer*, 26 December 1954, p. 8.

ever.<sup>69</sup> Despite these reservations, the reviewer admitted that ‘as a report on the war in Kenya, *A Thing to Love* contains, very vividly written, much that I have come across nowhere else.’<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, the *Irish Times* thought that in writing *A Thing to Love*, Huxley had ‘come very close to a dispassionate viewpoint’ and ‘produced an exciting and moving novel.’<sup>71</sup> This reviewer acknowledged the difficulty of tackling the subject of Mau Mau ‘with any degree of detachment.’<sup>72</sup> In common with the previous reviewers, he emphasised the journalistic quality of the novel – ‘a plain straightforward piece of reporting, with an easily followed story’ – but also commented on Huxley’s ability to be ‘uncommonly brutal when she chooses,’ adding that ‘underneath the murders, the espionage and the ineffective retaliation, one can sense the bewilderment of both white and black, the inability to understand why events should have taken the turn they have.’<sup>73</sup> The *Irish Times* was interested too in the novel’s critique of the government, with the reviewer remarking that ‘Mrs Huxley is not slow to blame the authorities for their failure to provide an outward sign for the majority of the Kikuyu.’<sup>74</sup>

The reviewers also attached great importance to characterisation and tended to view this as the novelist’s primary tool to educate the reader. *Time and Tide* singled out the character of Gitau as providing ‘a wonderfully true description of the ambitions and frustrations of those Africans who found that political agitation was not producing results and who were gradually tempted further and further along the road to terrorism.’<sup>75</sup> The *Guardian* saw Sam as the chief representative of the author’s own position on the Emergency, highlighting his personal journey from horror at ‘the excesses of hatred and fear he encounters’ to the realisation that ‘the solution lies in virtue and courage, and the supplanting of the “dark, barbaric demons” of cruelty by the finer values of the civilisation which he has denied.’<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, the *Irish Times* was interested in Matthew as ‘a product of the new Kenya,’ who is supported by his Christian faith, while the *TLS* considered Huxley’s ‘gallery of characters’ believable, adding that ‘[t]heir conflicting views are sincere reflections of their different temperaments and circumstances.’<sup>77</sup> The *Irish Times* further asked whether Pat’s decision to continue teaching would serve Kenya’s best interests, yet concluded that it ‘is, the author persuades us, the right one.’<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Walter Allen, ‘New Novels’, *New Statesman and Nation*, 23 October 1954, p. 513.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> [Anon.], ‘Recent Novels’, *Irish Times*, 6 November 1954, p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Alport, p. 1425.

<sup>76</sup> Patricia Hodgart, ‘New Novels’, *Manchester Guardian*, 12 October 1954, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup> *Irish Times*, 6 November 1954, p. 6; Calder-Marshall, 29 October 1954, p. 685.

<sup>78</sup> *Irish Times*, 6 November 1954, p. 6.



Harold Raymond, Huxley's editor at Chatto & Windus, appreciated the novel's topicality, as well as Huxley's 'usual fairness of judgement,' and considered it 'a good story.'<sup>79</sup> Raymond appeared unconcerned about the novel's positioning of Mau Mau, remarking:

The reader sees clearly that though the native has several natural and understandable grievances, the activities of Mau Mau cannot possibly be regarded as merely a revolt against the white man's rule. It is a reversion to savagery of the most bestial kind.<sup>80</sup>

Huxley herself expressed the hope that 'the book will not seem too topical and documentary – I mean to the exclusion of other qualities one looks for in a novel.'<sup>81</sup> In the event, Huxley's apprehensions about a possible tension between the novel's documentary ambitions and its literary merits proved partly justified. The *TLS* claimed that the novel 'fails as a work of literature,' because the political theme is inconclusive and 'the personal plot, the love-story [...] is not made big enough in proportion to the background.'<sup>82</sup> The *Sunday Times* argued that '[a]s a work of fiction the book has a rather feeble pulse: local colour is lavishly but not quickeningly applied; characterisation is barely adequate to indicate the varied mentalities in conflict and alliance.'<sup>83</sup> But *Time and Tide's* reviewer disagreed:

A novel written against the background of events which form the daily deadlines of the newspapers is always a risky undertaking for the author. Either fiction tends to distort fact, or fact straitjackets the author's imagination and prevents him from achieving the full development of his story. Mrs Huxley knows Kenya so well that she has been able to avoid these pitfalls in her new novel.<sup>84</sup>

*Time and Tide* further noted that the novel's inconclusive ending left the reader with 'the impression of incompleteness,' yet admitted that she was writing of unfolding political events.<sup>85</sup> In the *Observer*, Smith offered qualified praise when commenting on Huxley's ability to 'make her people true human beings played upon by the emotions that often grow darkest,' but concluded that the work is 'not literature perhaps' and that the love story is weak.<sup>86</sup>

In sum, the reviewers appeared most impressed with the novel's documentary quality and its diverse set of characters. However, while acknowledging its political theme, they were more concerned with its literary weaknesses, principally in relation to its romantic plot and lack of narrative closure. Advertising *A Thing to Love*, Huxley's publisher promised readers 'a book powerful in its grip upon thought and imagination,' highlighting '[t]error, strength and poignancy' as the most impressive qualities of her work, thus emphasising key features that modern literary scholars associate

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<sup>79</sup> Harold Raymond, letter to Elspeth Huxley, 20 May 1954.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Elspeth Huxley, letter to Harold Raymond, 24 May 1954. Emphasis in original.

<sup>82</sup> Calder-Marshall, p. 685.

<sup>83</sup> Lambert, p. 5.

<sup>84</sup> Alport, p. 1425.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Smith, 'New Novels', 26 December 1954, p. 8.

with the middlebrow.<sup>87</sup> The next two sections explore how tension, suspense and horror operate within Huxley's novel.

### **Suspense and resolution in *A Thing to Love***

In his reader report to Chatto & Windus, Cecil Day-Lewis comments positively on Huxley's plot development: 'The author builds up admirably the feeling of suspense and suspicion, and her scenes of violence pull no punches,' but adds: 'I thought the final chapter too indecisive – a clumsy tying up of loose ends, and unsatisfactory as a conclusion.'<sup>88</sup> Here Day-Lewis refers to the middlebrow's use of plot, suspense and resolution in order to create narrative tension, or as Baroni calls it, 'an anticipation tinged with uncertainty.'<sup>89</sup> We see this tension at work in the early chapters of *A Thing to Love*, when the reader is invited to share Pat's sense that 'there was something abnormal in the air' (69) and that her frightened servants are withholding the truth. As the narrative unfolds, Huxley's reader witnesses the deliberations of the Kikuyu servants and is able to fill in the gaps, their involvement with the leaders of the movement gradually becoming apparent.

To convey her protagonist's mounting panic, Huxley also relies on the tropes of the exotic, with the familiar farm surroundings acquiring an air of unfamiliarity. For Pat, the familiar walk across her parents' homestead has been transformed: 'the dappled light, the damp earthy smell, the flister [sic] of falling leaves and the feeling of mystery that bush and forest always engendered. So much was going on here, all of it secret and hidden, most of it cruel' (71). Here Huxley combines familiar elements, which could easily describe an English forest setting, and unfamiliar ones (the African bush), thus illustrating what Graham Huggan refers to as the ability of the exotic to 'oscillate[s] between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity.'<sup>90</sup> Further narrative tension is created as Huxley leads the reader towards the climaxing scene of the attack on the Foxleys, alternating between familiar farm sights and sounds, and the unfamiliar silence of the African night:

Now that night had come, it seemed very quiet outside. [...] A new moon stood over the trees, whose black lattice-work was visible against a less-than-black sky. Now, when the earth was asleep, faint smells came out that the sun quelled by day: a smell of grass, of soil, of pungent cedar and even, as it seemed, of the stream whose whisper could be heard across the lawn.  
(204-05)

The exotic was a mainstay of imperial fiction and an integral part of the underlying discourse of power. It encompasses a common set of organising metaphors to help the coloniser make sense and seek control of the unknown.<sup>91</sup> However, when focalising the advancing threat through Colonel

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<sup>87</sup> For example, *Daily Telegraph*, 29 October 1954, p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> Cecil Day-Lewis, 4 May 1954.

<sup>89</sup> Baroni, p. 18.

<sup>90</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 13.

<sup>91</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 159; Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (second edition), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 51-52; pp. 87-92.

Foxley, the exotic appears to have lost its meaning as a metaphor of Western understanding of (and control over) their colonial surroundings. Presenting the silent forest and distant mountain as alien and threatening, Huxley captures the instability of the trope, which, as Huggan notes, never achieves complete familiarity or predictability, and in turn signifies the fragility of imperial power:

The colonel sniffed and listened; no sound; it seemed unusually still. [...] He looked again into the night impressed, as he never failed to be, by its mystery and magic. At the full moon, he could often see the mountain's white peak hanging above the forest in a dark violet sky, and even now, though all was black and secret, he seemed to feel its great bulk, its huge silence presence, quietly brooding in the night.

[...]

The encircling stillness was torn by a sudden cry – something between a yelp and a shriek. (205)

A key element in the building of suspense, the exotic contributes to the narrative tension of Huxley's text, whilst also signifying the cognitive failure of the colonial project, as its discourse has become increasingly contested.<sup>92</sup>

Notwithstanding the middlebrow reader's aesthetic preferences, *A Thing to Love* fails to provide the expected closure and is the inevitable outcome of Huxley's decision to fictionalise an on-going conflict. After the climatic chase in the forest, which ends with the double killing of Gitau – shot through the head by Sam and speared 'deep into the stomach' (248) by his Kikuyu tracker – the narrative abandons the conspiracy, to focus on Sam's Home Guard and Pat's missionary friends. But there is no guarantee that the immediate future will be any less violent. The novel ends with Pat's vague promise to 'stand with those fighting the battle that never ended on the side that must not lose, and meet the destiny to which it seemed she had been assigned' (255) and Sam's equally vague commitment to use the tools of his civilisation to 'overcome these dark, barbaric demons, the cruelty and delight in cruelty, the wanton destructive impulse of the frustrated' (253). Sam's vision of a shared political future, which involves all of Kenya's communities, but seemingly excludes Mau Mau, is left unexpressed:

We are in it together, he wanted to say, and we shall come out battered but safe in the end – you and I, Matthew and the tracker [...] and all the Home Guards, the chiefs and the labourers, the Christians and schoolboys and teachers and farmers who won't, in the long run, accept the tyranny of fear, the religion of hatred, the code of revenge and the degradation of cruelty. (255-56)

In a marked departure from the lively two-sided debate and attentiveness to the broad spectrum of views on the Mau Mau movement that characterise the bulk of Huxley's narrative, this uncertain and elusive ending seemingly removes any authorial endorsement for a political solution that treats Kenya's indigenous majority as equal partners.

In contrast, in *Kenya Today*, a short pamphlet also published in 1954, Huxley lends her support to a future partnership, which affords equal rights to the different communities, even though

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<sup>92</sup> Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 14.

her notion of partnership requires the Kikuyu to ‘opt for the Western way of life’ in exchange for ‘a full share in the benefits, as well as in the burdens, of life on the European pattern.’<sup>93</sup> She also endorses proposals for a common citizenship, which would be open to all races and offer voting rights and other, unspecified privileges.<sup>94</sup> Later that year, she returns to this ‘common citizenship [...] with equal standards for all,’ adding that there can be no future without ‘a common loyalty, and no loyalty without a *feeling* of partnership, not mere words.’<sup>95</sup> How this can be achieved is not explored, and her novel’s conclusion does not imagine this shared political future either.

A well-crafted plot, Holmes remarks in her discussion of the middlebrow, implies the possibility of ‘reorganising patterns in what may be lived as chaos, of gaining some degree of wisdom and sense of meaning.’<sup>96</sup> Conversely, when full resolution is withheld, the reader is invited to create their own order and meaning, or alternatively, accept what Holmes calls the ‘messiness of the contingent.’<sup>97</sup> As demonstrated in this section, the middlebrow’s commitment to plot coherence and narrative closure comes under strain in a novel which recounts a contested and unresolved political conflict.<sup>98</sup> This friction is clearly visible in the 1954 reviews and underscores the tension between the middlebrow’s political aspirations and its desire to meet readers’ literary expectations, a recurrent theme in this thesis. Interestingly, Huxley responded to Day-Lewis’s criticism by cutting the final chapter, partly explaining the lack of closure.<sup>99</sup> *A Thing to Love*’s inconclusive ending also reveals Huxley’s personal fears and uncertainties, seen in her journalism and evident in her sensationalist language and imagery of horror, as I discuss next.

### **Imperial Gothic, colonial horror and the Emergency**

Horror featured prominently in late Victorian and early Edwardian imperial adventure stories by Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, Henry Rider Haggard and Edgar Wallace, amongst others. As shown by Patrick Brantlinger, their tales of exploration and conquest in distant, exotic lands routinely participate in a racist discourse, with vivid descriptions of tribal violence, barbarism and brutality crowding out realist detail.<sup>100</sup> This fiction also introduces Gothic elements into the colonial setting and is often referred to as ‘imperial Gothic,’ with imagery of the ‘destructive magic of the Orient’

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<sup>93</sup> Elspeth Huxley, *Kenya Today* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1954), p. 32.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>95</sup> ‘After Mau Mau’, *Sunday Times*, 28 November 1954, p. 6. Italics in original.

<sup>96</sup> Holmes, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

<sup>97</sup> Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters*, pp. 23-24; p. 30. See also Roland Barthes on the distinction between ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ texts. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) [1973], pp. 4-5.

<sup>98</sup> In contrast, M.M. Kaye’s crime novel *Later than You Think* (1958), also set in Kenya, features the expected resolution: the murder mystery is resolved; the romance plot ends with a marriage proposal; the political tensions recede into the background.

<sup>99</sup> Elspeth Huxley, letter to Nora Smallwood, 10 May 1954.

<sup>100</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 227-30.

featuring alongside instances of Oriental occultism and witchcraft.<sup>101</sup> Images of darkness, death and bestiality worked to re-reinforce existing beliefs of racial and moral superiority.<sup>102</sup> But they also expressed anxieties about the perceived decline of British civilisation, its possible descent into savagery and the weakening of imperial authority.<sup>103</sup> As we will see in chapter 6, Huxley reworks the dark tropes of the exotic and the associated images of horror in her later novel *A Man from Nowhere*, where they become part of a crime narrative.

Huxley's *Time and Tide* and *Telegraph* articles portrayed Mau Mau as a 'reversal to barbarism' and its killings and oaths as 'bestial' and 'perverse,' while at the same time emphasising its secret nature and comparing its practices with medieval witchcraft. Whereas her journalistic reports rarely provide much detail, *A Thing to Love* includes vivid descriptions of Mau Mau killings, secret rituals and torture scenes, together with a general sense of increasing horror. She spares the reader no detail when describing the mutilation of Piet's animals: 'Slashed. Some had their feet cut off and some were hamstrung and pulled themselves round with their hind legs useless and some were cut open and walked about with their guts hanging out, bellowing' (74). She also draws the reader into the torture scene orchestrated by Gitau, first showing how '[a] banana leaf had been placed carefully on the floor beside the arch and on it were two eyes that seemed to wink up at him with ghastly levity' (231), and later describing how Matthew 'bent forward, crying with pain, the eyes on the banana leaf star[ing] directly into his in wide and awful proximity. He stared back, appalled, knowing he would have to swallow them when the time came' (231-32).

A detailed account of the oathing ceremony held at Foxley's farm further illustrates Huxley's use of horror. Assuming the position of eyewitness, the third-person narrator describes the night-time scene in all its gory detail:

A low arch of banana leaves had been built near the fire and six sheep tethered here, three ewes and three rams. After a while, the sheep were stifled and cut up in a certain way, so that, in each case, a long strip of flesh from neck to genitals was preserved and laid on one side.

[...]

One by one, the people in the circle came forward and stood before Raphaelo stark naked, the firelight playing on their dark skins. Then, on all fours like animals, they crawled through the arch [...] each man in turn, in the full public eye, using his manhood for a purpose no god had ever intended.

[...]

As each man – and later, women also, took part – ate his raw and revolting portion of the sacrifice, he repeated after Raphaelo, seven oaths. (192-93)<sup>104</sup>

As noted by Maughan-Brown, such descriptions abound in the settler fiction of Mau Mau and can be traced back to the imperial narratives of Conrad and others.<sup>105</sup> Subsequent historical research has

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 227-30; p. 239.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12; Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 91-92; Brantlinger, pp. 229-30.

<sup>104</sup> Elkins mentions the seven oaths (*Gulag*, p. 27).

<sup>105</sup> Maughan-Brown, p. 54; p. 123.

shown that such scenes did not correspond to actual practices, even as they featured prominently in settlers' personal accounts and the metropolitan press.<sup>106</sup> Yet, Huxley's narrator confidently asserts that '[s]pirits were everywhere to-night; spirits, and mysteries beyond comprehension, generated by the rites in which all the living must participate to bind all present, the living and the dead, into a secret fellowship' (192). Leaving the reader in no doubt as to the horrific nature of what s/he has just witnessed, the narrator comments: 'These scenes, dragged up from the very bottom of the well of shame, would live on in the minds of their participants and nothing could ever efface them' (193). The assertive voice of the third-person narrator and the recycled images of Mau Mau violence and bestiality work together to compel the reader into accepting a one-sided view of the insurgency, without questioning the factual source or political motivation of Huxley's descriptions.

In the light of later scholarship on Mau Mau, Huxley's tropes of horror cast a shadow over her novelistic account of the Emergency. The sensationalist imagery depicting Mau Mau as a barbaric movement, endorsing the twin myths of white cultural superiority and African brutality, has not only marked the novel as a racist, pro-settler account, but also recalls the literary response to earlier anti-colonial insurgencies (such as the 1857 Rebellion or 'Indian Mutiny').<sup>107</sup> The use of horror also appears to support Maughan-Brown's argument that Huxley's fiction magnified the actual crimes committed by Mau Mau, as she adds detail that had no apparent evidential basis.<sup>108</sup> In Maughan-Brown's view, the descriptions of fictional oath-taking ceremonies and mutilated victims are far more detailed and gruesome than found in non-fiction, because the novelist is less constrained by lack of factual evidence, thus perpetuating the myth of African brutality.<sup>109</sup> While not contesting this interpretation, I note that the images and tropes of colonial horror co-exist with the novel's dialogism, which was grounded in her field research, even though she reproduces unproven rumours about Mau Mau practices. Interestingly, the scenes of torture and killing occur relatively late in the narrative, a fact noted by Day-Lewis, who remarks that as the novel progresses, the earlier balanced view of Mau Mau's grievances gives way to 'a heat-blood-and-thunder story.'<sup>110</sup>

In sum, Huxley's use of narrative conventions associated with imperial fiction – particularly the tropes of horror and the occult – produces a more biased account of the Kenyan Emergency than conveyed through the voices of her protagonists. In turn, this weakens the documentary quality of her novel and compromises its author's reputation as an expert witness. Interestingly, Huxley's 1954 reviewers do not appear to object to her sensationalist imagery, likely reflecting a more generalised public mood, saturated with stories of Mau Mau atrocities.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Branch, pp. 35-39; Maughan-Brown, p. 123. In contrast, Elkins provides similar detail (such as the banana leaf arch), based on interviews with elderly Kikuyu (*Gulag*, pp. 26-27).

<sup>107</sup> Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, p. 79.

<sup>108</sup> Maughan-Brown, pp. 106-07; p. 123.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106; p. 123.

<sup>110</sup> Day-Lewis, 4 May 1954.

<sup>111</sup> Carruthers, p. 138; pp. 169-70.

## Conclusion

Within the broader context of my research, Huxley cannot be considered a forgotten author. Yet, the existing scholarship tends to focus on her autobiographical work and its nostalgia for the Kenya of the early European pioneers and her own childhood. Critics also view her as a spokesperson for a late imperial narrative of the benevolent European presence in an otherwise ‘empty’ and unproductive land. Meanwhile, academic interest in her Emergency novel *A Thing to Love* is limited and primarily interprets the text as promoting settler-led anxieties about the brutality of the Mau Mau uprising, whilst also capturing metropolitan concerns about threats to white interests in the empire.

This chapter has made the case for a re-evaluation of Huxley’s novel as a more complex and multi-faceted account of Kenya’s political situation than acknowledged by previous scholars. First, by paying attention to the close relationship between her journalistic and her fictional writing, I have foregrounded the extent to which *A Thing to Love* captures Huxley’s interest in the deeper causes of the insurgency, as she uses her varied cast of characters to describe the conflicts and tensions experienced within both settler and African communities. I have also argued that Huxley’s use of dialogue to present multiple and divergent viewpoints locates her novel within the literary genealogy of political middlebrow novels written by journalist-writers, who explore topical political issues in an imaginary setting.

Yet, Huxley’s attempt at fictionalising an ongoing political conflict co-exists uneasily with her recourse to the tropes and imaginary of colonial horror, associated with an older imperial genre and revealing a lingering discourse of racial superiority. Additional bias in Huxley’s depiction of Mau Mau stems from her construction of suspense, a key feature of *A Thing to Love* overlooked by earlier scholars. The documentary quality of her novel is compromised too by her endorsement of untruths about Mau Mau that circulated widely in the British press and also featured in her own journalism. Nevertheless, Huxley’s reviewers implicitly agreed that the reader could trust the novelist with providing a truthful picture of the political reality.

Despite Huxley’s efforts to blend her journalistic reporting style with the generic requirements of the middlebrow novel, contemporary reviews suggests that she did not quite meet the aesthetic expectations of her metropolitan readers. In particular, the absence of closure, perhaps unsurprising when the author deals with topical, yet unresolved political issues, appears to have irked the 1954 reviewers. Yet, as seen too in *Goat to Kali*, narrative optimism and resolution may be elusive in the novel of decolonisation, thus indicating the limits of the political middlebrow when it aims to narrate ongoing political conflicts.

**CHAPTER 3: ‘HEARTS AND MINDS’ AND THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY:  
MARY MCMINNIES, *THE FLYING FOX* (1956)**

**Introduction**

When planning counterinsurgency operations in Kenya, British policymakers were mindful of developments in Malaya, where a concurrent campaign against communist insurgents was being fought with a combination of military force and civilian propaganda.<sup>1</sup> The controversies and contradictions of their policies emerge vividly and forcefully when Mary McMinnies fictionalises the end of British rule in Malaya, thereby following in the footsteps of Leslie and Huxley. This chapter reads *The Flying Fox* in relation to the British historiography of the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960).<sup>2</sup> It will argue that the novel is of literary and historical interest, as it undermines the prevailing official narrative, which viewed Malaya as a British success story and the counterinsurgency as a justified fight against communism.<sup>3</sup> A forgotten author today, McMinnies draws a picture of the Emergency, which covers many of the factors that would make up Malaya’s unique path to independence. She also provides a distinctly female perspective on life during the Emergency.

Published in March 1956, *The Flying Fox* is set in an imaginary state in the Federation of Malaya six years after the start of the Emergency (locating the narrative in late 1953 or early 1954).<sup>4</sup> The novel recounts the experiences of Milton Hall, who has arrived in Telebu after a string of unsuccessful jobs in post-war Europe. Malaya proves a disappointment to Milton and his wife Margery, lacking ‘the trappings of luxury or the glamour of the East’ (11) and the pair quickly descend into alcoholic abandon, in the process accumulating substantial debts with the town’s traders. The European taste for canned food and alcohol has proved particularly lucrative for Mr Wong, who besides owning a range of businesses in Telebu, has a stake in several unofficial schemes, together with Syed Hamid, a Malay businessman, whose wealth derives from his father’s illegal activities during the Japanese occupation. When British policeman Denys Farrar uncovers evidence of illegal rice smuggling masterminded by Wong and Hamid, District Officer Vivian Lucas decides to keep things quiet because ‘[p]eople would lose faith in local Government, in Government itself’ (37). After Milton inadvertently reveals the content of Farrar’s report, Hamid resorts to blackmailing and causes Farrar to take his own life. Lucas becomes aware of Milton’s role and when the latter is summoned to court for causing a traffic accident which injured a high-ranking Indian official, he is told to leave the

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, p. 115; p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> Mary McMinnies, *The Flying Fox* (London and Glasgow: Collins Fontana books, 1962) [1956]. All references will be to this edition and will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

<sup>3</sup> T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 365; Bayly and Harper, p. 527; p. 532; Karl Hack, *The Malayan Emergency: Revolution and Counterinsurgency at the End of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 449-51.

<sup>4</sup> The novel was published in Britain and America. It was re-issued as a paperback in 1962 and 1986.



colony. The novel's title refers to a '[k]ind of bat. They eat it' (15), which in an early scene, is being slowly tortured to death by a gang of local children.

Literary scholarship on the end of British rule in Malaya has focused primarily on Han Suyin's ... *and the Rain my Drink* (1956) and Burgess's *Malayan Trilogy* (and to a lesser extent Sillitoe's *Key to the Door* (1961)).<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, a contemporary reviewer of *Time for a Tiger* (1956) (the first part of Burgess's trilogy) remarks on the 'obvious affinities with "The Flying Fox" – including a similar preoccupation with the more chequered aspects of colonial life.'<sup>6</sup> Burgess himself includes McMinnies in his survey *The Novel Now* (1967), describing her work as a 'perceptive stud[y] of Malaya in a state of transition. [...] a multi-racial tapestry of Malaysians learning the "new look" of independence.'<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, the comparison with Han is made, with the Singapore-based *Straits Times* commenting that McMinnies 'has no need to fear it.'<sup>8</sup>

Continuing my exploration of the political ambitions of the female middlebrow, this chapter's first objective is to demonstrate how McMinnies combines fact and fiction to produce a dialogic text, which throws a critical light on British colonial politics in Malaya, questioning what Tim Harper calls the 'optimistic rhetoric of a stewardship successfully concluded.'<sup>9</sup> Presenting a multi-ethnic community, divided by political and economic interests, and by a history of living with ethnic rivalry which cannot be resolved through European intervention, the novel illuminates the distant colonial conflict, described by Graham Greene as an all-pervading mist.<sup>10</sup> In the context of a historiographical tradition which until recently has prioritised top-down accounts, focused on the principal actors in the insurgency and counterinsurgency campaigns, *The Flying Fox* provides an important alternative perspective, bringing the experience of ordinary people to the fore.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the chapter examines McMinnies's portrayal of late colonial society. Reflecting on her reading of colonial memoirs, Margaret Shennan comments on the gap between the negative perceptions of the British in Malaya as a 'smug, superficial, patronizing community' and the views of survivors from the colonial era, who remained convinced that 'it was a good and well-ordered world,

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Burgess published *Time for a Tiger* in October 1956; Han Suyin published ... *and the Rain my Drink* in July 1956. See Andrew Biswell, 'Writing Imperial Decline in South East Asia', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 10: The Novel in South and South East Asia since 1945*, ed. by Alex Tickell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 383-97; Anne Wetherilt, 'Representations of the Malayan Emergency: Reading Han Suyin, Mary McMinnies and Anthony Burgess', in *The Malayan Emergency in Film, Literature, and Art: Cultural Memory as Historical Other*, ed. by Jonathan Driskell, Andrew Hock Soon Ng and Marek Rutkowski (London and New York: Bloomsbury Press, forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Green, 'Cruelty, Filth and Civil War', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 October 1956, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now: A Student's Guide to Contemporary Fiction* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 157. McMinnies is mentioned alongside Katharine Sim and Susan Yorke. The three women writers are praised too in an earlier British Council publication: Anthony Burgess, *The Novel To-day* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1963), p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Warwick, 'Inside the Tenth Malay State', *Straits Times*, 6 August 1956, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Harper, *End of Empire*, p. 365. See also Bayly and Harper, p. 527; p. 532.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* (London: Vintage Books, 2002), p. 141. Greene visited Malaya in 1951 as a correspondent for *Life* magazine.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Z. Keo, 'A Small, Distant War? Historiographical Reflections on the Malayan Emergency', *History Compass*, 17:3 (2019), 1-12 (pp. 6-7) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12523>>.

served by a code of liberal Western values, many of which are universally tenable today.’<sup>12</sup> As the chapter shows, McMinnies lays bare the gap between metropolitan and colonial sensitivities, in part by detailing the lost glamour of colonial life, in part by rejecting the ideologically constructed image of the benevolent colonial administrator, who is ‘preparing’ the colonised for independence. Additionally, I locate *The Flying Fox* within a longer literary tradition of imperial middlebrow writing, in particular W. Somerset Maugham’s (1874-1965) Malayan stories, focusing on the tropes of the genre (the colonial home, the club) as markers of declining imperial confidence and authority.

Third, I suggest that McMinnies’s interest in the women of late colonial Malaya marks her novel as radically distinct from the male fiction of the period, as she foregrounds women’s perspectives on the transition from colony to post-colony and their role in maintaining the social and cultural institutions of empire. Highlighting women’s take on British colonial policy, McMinnies adds critical depth to her interrogation of the dominant (masculine) narrative. Furthermore, and in common with Leslie’s *Goat to Kali*, her late colonial narrative draws on domestic tropes that would have been familiar to her female readers.<sup>13</sup> As in chapter 1, I explore how the tropes of fashion, food and the home bring to life anxieties regarding women’s class and gender identities, while presenting the decolonising world as a place that further complicates these issues. Finally, I study the metropolitan reader response through contemporary assessments of the novel’s documentary and literary qualities, paying particular attention to the reception of its politics.

### **Mary McMinnies and the Malayan Emergency**

In the prologue to *The Flying Fox*, McMinnies introduces the state of Mandora in the Federation of Malaya, stating: ‘it would be vain for the reader to seek to identify [...] Mandora. It is fictitious – as indeed is the town of Telebu, and all the characters connected with it’ (7). However, the novel’s political context bears close resemblance to actual events in post-war Malaya, its discussion of colonial politics and its carefully drawn background testifying to McMinnies’s intimate knowledge of local conditions. ‘I didn’t have to look far for material,’ she later wrote, ‘it was all to hand.’<sup>14</sup> Intriguingly, she also reports having to cut her novel by a third – ‘a gruelling task’ – leaving the researcher to wonder how much documentary material has been left out.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret Shennan, *Out in the Midday Sun: The British in Malaya 1880-1960* (Burrough on the Hill: Monsoon Books, 2019), p. 24. See also Tim Harper, ‘The British “Malayans”’, in *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons over the Seas*, ed. by Robert Bickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 233-68 (pp. 233-35; p. 266).

<sup>13</sup> See also Anne Wetherilt, ‘Emergency Politics and the Middlebrow Novel: A Comparative Analysis of Han Suyin’s ... and the Rain my Drink and Mary McMinnies’s *The Flying Fox*’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 57:2 (2021), 255-68.

<sup>14</sup> McMinnies, MS undated, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

‘Living on a hilltop in Central Johore, often alone, often bored, and always worried about my husband’s safety,’ McMinnies started writing her novel at the height of the Emergency.<sup>16</sup> A state of Emergency had been in place since 1948, as a direct response to the murders of three European planters. But violence had been increasing since 1946, led by communist insurgents, who opposed the reconsolidation of British rule after the war and sought to establish a communist republic.<sup>17</sup>

British rule in Malaya had ended abruptly in February 1942, when Singapore fell to the Japanese army. As seen in the Indian context, the surrender revealed Britain’s military weakness and shattered the imperial ideology of Western superiority. A period of chaos and communal violence followed the Japanese defeat in August 1945, with Chinese communist guerrillas carrying out reprisals against Malays accused of being collaborators. The resulting resentment and suspicion between ethnic groups would profoundly shape Malaya’s path to independence, replacing what Harper calls ‘the looser pluralism of the mid-colonial period’ with harder-edged communal differences.<sup>18</sup>

After 1948, the communist insurgents regrouped as the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) and retreated into the jungle, concentrating their efforts on sabotaging military installations, and attacking tin mines and rubber plantations. But the MNLA was hampered in its effectiveness by a lack of support from the majority Muslim population. Further, even though the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and its military arm, the MNLA, were constituted primarily of Malayan Chinese, they never had the support of more conservative Chinese business interests. Instead, they relied primarily on Chinese squatters and a network of civilian cells (*Min Yuen*) in rural villages. But the guerrillas had superior knowledge of the jungle and the British were unable to stop their activities, despite the deployment of organised military incursions, air bombardments, curfews and collective punishments.

With the arrival of General Sir Harold Briggs in 1950 as Director of Operations, the British counterinsurgency approach evolved to include forced resettlement. As part of what became known as the Briggs plan, thousands of Chinese squatters were moved to internment camps (‘New Villages’) in order to sever the network of *Min Yuen* who supplied the MNLA fighters operating from the jungle. After Sir Gerald Templer took over as High Commissioner and Director of Operations in February 1952, the British embarked on a so-called ‘hearts and minds’ campaign to secure the confidence of the general population, for example through the provision of sanitation, healthcare and education. Referring to a less coercive manner of military intervention, the term ‘hearts and minds’ dates back to the 1930s, when it was used in the context of a military campaign on the Indian Northwest frontier.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. John Gordon McMinnies joined General Templer’s ‘hearts and minds’ campaign in 1953 (Walbridge, p. 186).

<sup>17</sup> This historical overview draws on: Noel Barber, *The War of the Running Dogs: How Malaya Defeated the Communist Guerrillas 1948-60* (London: Cassell, 2004) [1971]; Bayly and Harper; Harper, *End of Empire*; Grob-Fitzgibbon; Hack, *Malayan Emergency*; and Hyam.

<sup>18</sup> Harper, *End of Empire*, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Dixon, “‘Hearts and Minds’? British Counter-Insurgency from Malaya to Iraq”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 32:3 (2009), 353-81 (p. 361).

It is most commonly associated with a speech given by Templer in Malaya in April 1952, when he declared that ‘[t]he answer [to the uprising] lies not in pouring more troops into the jungle, but in the hearts and minds of the people.’<sup>20</sup> The new administration also designated areas cleared of guerrillas as ‘white areas’ and their promotion was part of a propaganda campaign to convince rural Chinese in particular to throw their support behind the British government, rather than the MCP.<sup>21</sup> Historians are, however, divided over the effectiveness of the British approach, with some arguing that the ‘hearts and minds’ campaign was the decisive factor in stemming the insurgency, and others claiming that the British continued to rely on military coercion, leading to frequent human rights violations.<sup>22</sup> As we shall see, McMinnies’s narrator is ambivalent too.

As the Cold War intensified, British politicians increasingly viewed Malaya as a bulwark against the advance of communism in Southeast Asia. In addition, exports of rubber and tin from this lucrative colony were crucial to Britain’s economic recovery from the Second World War, generating much-needed dollar revenues. British politicians therefore had an interest in painting the Emergency as a fight against the spread of communism in order to secure American support for their policies, despite the latter’s anti-colonial stance. At home, politicians were concerned to manage public opinion, as they did not want to appear weak in their response to the insurgency (and the protection of British interests), nor incur the criticism that excessive force was being employed.<sup>23</sup> As there was no strong domestic demand to accelerate the transfer of power, London’s preference for delaying independence until there was more evidence of cooperation between the various ethnic parties did not encounter much resistance.<sup>24</sup> It is only after Malayan elections in February 1955, which demonstrated strong popular support for the three-party alliance of Malay, Chinese and Indian politicians, and broader international developments (including the French departure from Vietnam and the Bandung conference in April 1955) that the British government agreed to proceed more quickly.<sup>25</sup>

Malaya achieved independence in 1957 as the Federation of Malaya and was renamed Malaysia in 1963, when North Borneo and Sarawak joined. Singapore, which had become a Crown Colony after the war, became part of Malaysia in 1963, before gaining independence as the Republic of Singapore in 1965. Malaysia maintained strong links with Britain through the Commonwealth and through continued British commercial investments. Although the Emergency itself was ended in July

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 361-62.

<sup>21</sup> Hack, *Malayan Emergency*, p. 16; p. 285.

<sup>22</sup> The debate is outlined in: Dixon, pp. 367-71; Karl Hack, ‘The Malayan Emergency as Counter-Insurgency Paradigm’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 32:3 (2009), 383-414; Hack, *Malayan Emergency*, pp. 333-39; pp. 449-51; Keo, pp. 4-5; and Kumar Ramakrishna, “‘Transmogrifying’ Malaya: The Impact of Sir Gerald Templer (1952-54)”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 32:1 (2001), 79-92. See also Fabian Klose, “‘Source of Embarrassment’: Human Rights, State of Emergency, and the Wars of Decolonization”, in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 237-57.

<sup>23</sup> Butler, p. 114; Darwin, *The End of the British Empire*, pp. 18-20.

<sup>24</sup> Hack, *Malayan Emergency*, p. 400; p. 402.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 406; Hyam, pp. 199-200.

1960, British troops remained in Malaysia and Singapore, primarily to protect business interests, until the British government decided to withdraw its military forces from 1970 onwards.

Throughout the conflict, the British government was keen to present the 'right' image of Malayan developments to the public at home. In the early years of the Emergency, this meant underplaying the nationalist cause of the insurgency, and presenting the MCP and the MNLA as 'bandits' or 'terrorists.'<sup>26</sup> Colonial Office reports also described the Malayan Chinese as 'sitting on the fence,' and hence winning their support was viewed as critical.<sup>27</sup> After Templer's arrival, a shift in government strategy and communications led to the acknowledgement of the MCP's political and ideological motivations, and the term 'bandits' was replaced by 'Communist Terrorists.'<sup>28</sup> Throughout, the government was careful not to make too much of its economic interests in the region, while at the same time presenting British efforts as promoting the interests of the law-abiding citizens of Malaya and guiding the colony towards 'responsible self-government' within the Commonwealth.<sup>29</sup>

As shown by Carruthers, British media criticism was limited, apart from the left-wing paper the *Daily Worker*.<sup>30</sup> The press routinely described the MCP as bandits, with most papers agreeing that Templer's regime in Malaya was a success and that the fight against communism was justified.<sup>31</sup> Carruthers detects no support for an immediate British withdrawal, again with the exception of the *Daily Worker*.<sup>32</sup> Some papers were, however, critical of Templer's tactics, such as the burning down of villages in 'black areas.'<sup>33</sup> Finally, and in common with the Kenyan Emergency, metropolitan film and documentary coverage was one-sided, typically showing white communities threatened by the violence of the colonised, and emphasising the bravery of the planters and the British troops operating in the jungle.<sup>34</sup>

### ***The Flying Fox and Emergency politics***

Working on her novel, McMinnies found herself in the midst of hostilities and although by 1953 the back of the insurgency had been broken, the 'hearts and minds' campaign had not replaced the aggressive security interventions of the earlier period.<sup>35</sup> A glimpse of British heavy-handedness is

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<sup>26</sup> Bayly and Harper, p. 436; Carruthers, p. 76-78. The 'Emergency' was never referred to as a war, so Malayan planters could claim damage from the insurgents' attacks on their insurance (Harper, *End of Empire*, pp. 151-52; Bayly and Harper, p. 436).

<sup>27</sup> Carruthers, p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 84-85; Grob-Fitzgibbon, p. 207.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 171; Carruthers, pp. 100-01.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 110-11. For example, the *Daily Worker* raised questions about the brutal killing of Chinese labourers at Batang Kali in 1948. This was vehemently denied by the British government but resurfaced in the British press in 1970 (Bayly and Harper, pp. 449-56).

<sup>31</sup> Carruthers, pp. 106-08.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 96-97; pp. 108-11.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 107-08.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 111-16; Webster, *Englishness*, p. 122.

<sup>35</sup> Hack refers to the period from late 1952 onwards as the optimisation phase. Insurgent numbers and casualty rates fell steadily throughout Templer's tenure (*Malayan Emergency*, pp. 16-17).

given in a February 1954 article written by McMinnies for the *New Statesman*. Here, she joins her husband in an undercover mission to check on rice smuggling:

There were trucks for the Food Control teams; empty trucks with neat piles of sacks to ‘lift’ the rice; ‘propaganda vans,’ conspicuous by the sinister, slightly Orwellian, oblong maws of loudspeakers; army and police escorts of scout cars, G.M.C.s, troop transports packed with solemn National Servicemen [...] shining chauffeur-driven cars belonging to Government officers; and a single seedy one, ours.<sup>36</sup>

She further comments on the precarious status of the resettlement policy:

families uprooted from vulnerable spots, often from the fringe of the jungle itself, formed a community protected by wire. Such villages are exposed to contact and threats by day; by night, the rice, or whatever else is extorted [...] leaks through the wire. A ‘resettled’ village always contains some malcontents, or members of the ‘hard core,’ or parents who know it is their own sons in need of food on the other side of the wire.<sup>37</sup>

‘[T]he day had gone well,’ she concludes, not without sympathy for the New Villagers: ‘Nearly ten tons of rice had been lifted. Results, in terms of surrender, were not to be expected until after the first six weeks; in the meantime, the villagers must suffer the house curfew and the hardship of reduced rations.’<sup>38</sup> In common with Leslie and Huxley, McMinnies draws on personal experience to bring colonial politics to the attention of her metropolitan audience, combining lively detail and an element of suspense with critical commentary. As I show next, she applies a similar approach to her novel, primarily through her use of narrative voice.

The Emergency functions not only as background to a story of local corruption but is also the subject of explicit commentary by the third-person narrator, who competes with the novel’s main protagonists, resulting in a multi-voiced debate on British and Malayan politics. During the ‘bandit war’ (65) and ‘those evil days of terrorism’ (65), the narrator explains, latex trucks had been ambushed and local villagers attacked, while military vehicles would only venture into so-called red zones under ‘heavily protected convoy’ (65). The Briggs plan, the narrator continues, ‘was devised as a means of so concentrating the scattered population (mainly Chinese, although some Malays and aborigines were included) living in isolated and vulnerable spots as to protect them from bandit attack’ (65-66). But ‘plac[ing] them under the close supervision of Government’ (66), the narrator admits, was meant to achieve two goals, first, ‘to remove them from the temptation to act as food suppliers or as contacts with the enemy’ (66), and second, ‘that their faltering steps might the more easily be guided along paths lit by ideals of Western culture, freedom and citizenship’ (66). Another key plank of the Briggs plan, Peng Yu, a fictional New Village, is lauded as a success story. Telebu’s Mr Wong at once appreciates its strategic location, speedily removing the ‘squalid squatter shelters’

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<sup>36</sup> Mary McMinnies, ‘Operation in Johore’, *New Statesman and Nation*, 20 February 1954, pp. 215-16 (p. 216).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 215-16.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

(67), while the High Commissioner ‘on a tour of the New Villages, was impressed and made a speech which hit the headlines bringing Peng Yu into the limelight’ (67).<sup>39</sup>

The narrator is less confident about the British counterinsurgency tactics, highlighting the innate advantage of the insurgents and the relative disadvantage of the British military:

A ‘funny’ war, no doubt about it, a war waged against shadows. After six long years, in spite of the strength of the Government forces with every sort of modern equipment at their disposal, the initiative still lay with the enemy, a handful of men sketchily armed with stolen weapons, but with the advantage of the jungle on their side. (34)

The jungle, erstwhile symbol of colonial darkness, has become a political contact zone, representing the unequal encounter of communist resistance fighters and British military forces.<sup>40</sup>

For the jungle had a ruthless way with expensive modern weapons, and discounted many of them; shadows in the jungle were no reasonable target for bombers nor yet for artillery. Green troops, however, superior in numbers, created a problem of their own, because the jungle itself unnerved young Europeans bred to an office desk, a factory bench. It was a snipers’ war. (34)

At the same time, the narrator draws the reader’s attention to the inhumanity of British military tactics, thus recalling McMinnies’s *New Statesman* piece:

But, however much like shadows the enemy might appear to their pursuers, they were men of flesh and blood, and they lived on rice. If they could not be bombed or shelled out of the jungle, they could be starved out. It was at this stage of the war, when it looked as though it might continue like a running sore indefinitely, that all the wits, the efforts of the authorities, police, civil and military, were combined to control the movement, the sale, and the consumption of the vital commodity – rice. (34)

However, British efforts to stem the flow of provisions to the insurgents in the jungle prove ineffective, again echoing the earlier article:

Families were rationed to a hardship minimum, lorries carrying rice travelled in convoy, were checked before, after and during a journey; tappers were searched as they queued up at the town wire at dawn before being permitted to go out into the rubber; there were house-to-house searches, snap-checks in the shops, whole armies of clerks engaged in the business of ration cards [...] beyond any doubt, a proportion of the rice unloaded at Telebu jetty under the very noses of the Customs and the auspices of Rice Merchants’ Incorporated found its way into the jungle. (34-35)

McMinnies further employs her narrator to describe the coercive methods employed in the resettlement campaign, again combining fact-based reporting – ‘Once moved to the chosen spots, the settlers were herded behind barbed wire’ (66) – and ironic commentary – ‘an expedient to which there was no alternative, but as regrettable as it was unpicturesque, and which was, of course, seized

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<sup>39</sup> Most likely McMinnies is referring to Templer, who personally visited many New Villages, keen to present the British government as a ‘benevolent Provider, a friend’ (Ramakrishna, p. 90).

<sup>40</sup> The centrality of the jungle in the anti-colonial struggle is fictionalised in Han Suyin’s... *and the Rain my Drink* and Chin Kee Onn’s *The Grand Illusion* (1961). The hostility of the jungle setting is brought to life in Chapman, F. Spencer, *The Jungle Is Neutral* (1950); the inexperience of British troops is a key theme in Leslie Thomas’s novel *The Virgin Soldiers* (1966).

upon by the enemy with delight for motives of propaganda' (66) – indicating that the 'hearts and minds' policy was far more aggressive in its efforts to secure the support of the people than admitted by the authorities.<sup>41</sup> As such, McMinnies's narrator is inconsistent in their critique: at times closely following the official line; at others presenting a critical perspective, which appears at odds with the official view that the British campaign was a resounding success and that the communist threat was overcome without the application of excessive violence.<sup>42</sup> The narrator's irony also reveals cracks in the official discourse and hints at the implied author's disapproval:

An admirable plan – but it would be incompatible with truth to describe its execution in the same glowing terms. It was an unfortunate necessity that the operation of transfer had to be carried out by fully armed detachments of military and police. (66)

The narrator is employed too to offer a commentary on Malaya's history of ethnic tension, in particular the Malay resentment at Chinese economic dominance. But here, the narrator competes with other voices, as McMinnies uses both direct and free indirect speech to present divergent perspectives on the conflict, which she does not attempt to reconcile. In the first instance, the narrator employs common racial stereotypes to criticise both the Chinese and the Malay:

All sorts of Chinese now swarmed into Peng Yu. The handful of Malays who had been there before the arrival of the settlers and who owned a cluster of huts and smallholdings were now pushed into a backwater to stagnate. [...] It is axiomatic that Malays are up to the ears in debt, and the Malays of Peng Yu were no exception. Overjoyed to find the Chinese willing, even eager to lend them money, [...] Soon, their smallholdings signed away, the Malays counted themselves lucky if permitted to remain in their huts working the land for their creditors. That disposed of the Malays. From then on, Peng Yu was to all intents and purposes Chinese. (67-68)

According to Adeline Koh, older racial tropes, which presented the Malay as lazy and the Chinese as unscrupulous and justified British paternalism, were re-employed during the Emergency as they demonstrated that the former were in need of protection from the latter.<sup>43</sup> A similar racial prejudice underlies the narrator's dismissive attitude towards the Chinese who seek to profit from the government's resettlement scheme:

However, on being provided with materials to build themselves houses and allotments on which to grow vegetables, their attitude, understandably sullen at first, gradually became less intransigent – if only because it could be seen with half a Chinese eye that the larger the community the more chance of making money. (66)

Yet, while McMinnies's use of racial stereotypes seemingly endorses British policies, her narrator is not always consistent in the portrayal of Malaya's ethnic groups. For instance, when describing the official attitude towards Mr Wong, we detect a Bakhtinian double-voicedness in the narrator's ironic commentary:

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<sup>41</sup> Dixon, p. 353; pp. 367-69.

<sup>42</sup> Bayly and Harper, p. 527; Dixon, p. 354; Hack, *Malayan Emergency*, pp. 449-51; Keo, pp. 3-5.

<sup>43</sup> Adeline M. Koh, *Inventing Malayaness: Race, Education and Englishness in Colonial Malaya* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Michigan, 2008), pp. 12-14; p. 99.



As for authority on high, it simply sat back and watched this prodigy of a New Village with uneasy wonder; as though say, a missionary, a zealous fellow, in a moment of kindly if unbridled enthusiasm and from none but the purest motives, had been led astray and begotten a monster; one for which, although it had been eagerly adopted by wealthy and loving foster-parents, he still could not rid himself of the moral responsibility. (68)

Similarly, when presenting Farrar's distrust of the Malayan Chinese, the narrator adds an element of discordance by injecting their own view, implicitly casting judgement on Farrar's racist views:

Farrar disliked the place with all his heart. Sourly, he peered at the row of eating-shops up one side of the main street. All full, flourishing, and Chinese. He himself did not care for the Chinese, and made no secret of it, being one of those expatriates who judged that if there were no Chinese in Malaya there would be no trouble either – a point of view by no means unshared, tenable even, but quite lacking in objectivity. There were Chinese in Malaya, and to stay. (156)

By undermining a character whose personal integrity and knowledge of Malaya was emphasised earlier in the narrative, McMinnies's narrator contributes to the ambivalence of the novel's implied critique, but also underscores the complexity of the situation. Further accentuating the ethnic rivalry, McMinnies introduces a third party, the Eurasian Dr Anthony, who remarks: 'the Malays – they have a kind of backwoods cunning and they know the score [...] because they belong here. The Chinese get by because they are tough and numerous – even Malays would have a job disposing of them' (60).

Hostilities date back to the war years, and Hamid and his late father are known as the 'Crocodiles' (21), the latter having 'laid the foundations of the now flourishing timber business by eliminating his rival' (20) on the eve of the Japanese withdrawal. More generally, the Japanese occupation casts a long shadow. Hamid launches his stories with 'in Jap time' (20) to 'illustrate his past loyalty to the British Raj even under the heel of enemy oppression' (20), whilst Farrar suffers from recurrent nightmares, which bring back his time in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp:

at once there swept over him in all its violence the sensation he had fought against for years; he was back in the prison camp, he was driven, fleeing like a rat, doubling this way and that, he was hemmed in, something thick, woollen, musty, thrown over his head, he was caught in its folds, and suffocating, tried to scream – but no sound came. In the early years after his release he had experienced this at frequent intervals, then more rarely; but now it leapt upon him exactly as it had always been. (160)

Hence, McMinnies employs her various British and Asian characters to convey tensions in the colony. Through their voices, she relates the Emergency to long-standing ethnic conflicts and to the Japanese occupation, while casting doubt on Malaya's future as a multi-ethnic state. In particular, she appears to question the belief that Britain would help shape a multi-racial Malayan national identity in preparation for independence.<sup>44</sup> This is apparent from Lucas's reflections on 'this really appalling racial conflict which could go off like a load of dynamite' (230) and his lack of trust in the Malaysans'

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<sup>44</sup> The creation of a multi-racial Malayan national identity was a key pillar of the British strategy but failed to get support from the various ethnic communities. See Harper, *End of Empire*, pp. 358-62; Bayly and Harper, p. 532; Hack, *Malayan Emergency*, pp. 387-88; p. 430.

ability to build a multi-ethnic nation, derisively referred to as ‘the successful experiment of four races keeping house together’ (230). It is manifest too in Dr Anthony’s remarks: ‘Malaya, you see, is very much a personality in its own right’ (60), while the Europeans ‘are stranded on a sort of – island which is *itself* hostile, let alone the natives, and God knows they are’ (61).<sup>45</sup>

As we have seen, McMinnies foregrounds the failures of British policy, both in terms of halting local support for the terrorists in the jungle and in promoting a multi-ethnic Malayan state. While she does not comment on the ideological motives of the communist insurgents, she admits the damaging impact of imperialism, hinting at the economic and social inequalities that underpin the colonial economy. This is succinctly captured in an image of the ‘coolie mail [which] lumbered down the line, the third class [sic] carriages teeming with Indian labour, then giant logs of teak, mahogany, then latex drums’ (149). Elsewhere, she describes ‘a shadowy procession of women [who] picked their way amongst the rubble, loads of bricks on their turbaned heads’ (156). While not an overt critique of economic practices, these two glimpses of colonial labour are indicative of the implied author’s disapproval of the imperial project.

It is worth noting too that McMinnies focuses more on what divides the respective ethnic groups and less on the negotiations about Malaya’s political future, which at the time of writing were quite advanced. The novel ends with Mr Wong celebrating his latest business venture, which will likely land him on the New Year’s Honours list (250), and Lucas applauding his efforts, thus privileging the British point of view. Hence, while McMinnies presents a relatively well-informed picture of Malaya’s past and present, her fiction does not contribute to the imagining of a new national community. That would be the task of a first generation of Asia-born writers with closer ties to the region, including Chin Kee Onn and Han Suyin.<sup>46</sup>

In sum, McMinnies pays due attention to the multiple factors underlying Malaya’s Emergency, as she describes the country’s ethnic tensions, the threat of communist terrorism, the British official counterinsurgency response and the lingering impact of the Japanese occupation. As shown thus far, she relies heavily on her narrator to convey divergent perspectives on the British presence. To the extent that her novel critiques the official British response, it is done obliquely, through the narrator’s irony, resulting in a Bakhtinian double-voiced narrative intervention. While McMinnies conveys an emergent sense of late colonial crisis, her descriptions of ethnic rivalries reveal a residual attachment to the racist typologies of earlier colonial fiction that helped legitimise colonial rule, thereby diluting her incisive critique of British colonial policy.

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<sup>45</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>46</sup> Han’s novel highlights the restricted role of the Malayan Chinese in shaping the country’s political future. Chin Kee Onn emphasises the potential for a unified Malaya once the communist threat has been removed.

## Readers and the Malayan Emergency

*The Flying Fox* was widely reviewed in British newspapers, suggesting that the novel made its mark on the cultural landscape of early 1956. In the first instance, contemporary reviewers praised *The Flying Fox*'s documentary quality, with the *Guardian* describing McMinnies as 'a sharp and intelligent observer conveying her perceptions in clear, unpretentious, and subtle prose,' adding that she 'has the sort of poise which comes from an unusually thorough knowledge of the world and unusually broad humane, and yet critical sympathies.'<sup>47</sup> The *TLS* remarked:

the best parts of her novel are her descriptions of the Malayan scene and Malayan life, of which she has obviously considerable personal knowledge, and which she has shrewdly observed as the meeting-ground of different mentalities and moralities as well as of different people.<sup>48</sup>

Others called it 'modern realism of the documentary kind [...] a first-class documentary,' 'packed tightly with information and incident,' and winning 'acceptance as a "documentary," rather than on purely artistic merits.'<sup>49</sup> The *Telegraph* compared her writing with Lessing's, claiming: 'Miss McMinnies is a real discovery. She possesses a gritty sense of humour; a capacity for pungent characterisation, male as well as female; an observant eye for the visually exotic; and a well-developed sociological nose.'<sup>50</sup>

Coverage of the novel's colonial politics was relatively limited. The *Guardian* briefly cited 'the tense and cosmopolitan Malayan community suffering under the strain of bandits, corruption, and climate,' while *The Times* merely noted: '*The Flying Fox* is hardly the whole story of Malaya to-day, but it is absorbing reading.'<sup>51</sup> The *Sunday Times* referred to 'conflicting racial interests' and alluded to 'a community fighting Communism and living on its nerves' – but did not mention the British counterinsurgency response.<sup>52</sup> The *Illustrated London News* provided a little more detail on the political background to McMinnies's story: 'The emergency has passed its peak, but it goes on. And the respected citizens – especially the Chinese – alternately supply the bandits with rice, and confer with the District Officer on how to stamp them out.'<sup>53</sup> Of note though is the *Daily Telegraph*'s review, which hints at the novel's subversive content: 'Her analysis of the complex Malayan situation will probably displease the Colonial Office and the Communists equally; but most readers falling into neither uneasy category should find it absorbing.'<sup>54</sup>

Reflecting a key interest of middlebrow readers, reviewers celebrated the novel's central protagonists, Milton in particular, described by the *Telegraph* as 'a richly stylish bounder,' who

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<sup>47</sup> Douglas Hewitt, 'New Fiction', *Manchester Guardian*, 20 March 1956, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> David Tylden-Wright, 'Eastern Pursuits', *TLS*, 13 April 1956, p. 217.

<sup>49</sup> K. John, 'Notes for the Novel-Reader', *Illustrated London News*, 28 April 1956, p. 424; Oliver Edwards, 'New Fiction', *The Times*, 15 March 1956, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Green, 'Careering in Style in the East', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 March 1956, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Hewitt, p. 4; Edwards, p. 13.

<sup>52</sup> Marie Scott-James, 'Fiction of the Week', *Sunday Times*, 11 March 1956, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> John, 28 April 1956, p. 424.

<sup>54</sup> Green, 23 March 1956, p. 8.

‘explodes on official Malayan society like a bottle of credit champagne.’<sup>55</sup> Others too singled out Milton as McMinnies’s ‘most splendid creation [...] Comic, pathetic, appalling, he is the most fascinating creature of this year’s fiction,’ possessing ‘an egregious kind of appeal.’<sup>56</sup> *The Times* called him ‘that typical post-war “hero,” the shabby gentleman who drifts from racket to racket picking up an easy living until he is found out.’<sup>57</sup> Elsewhere, he is termed ‘a destructive agent’ and ‘a shifty little rogue,’ ‘who endangers lives and policies by his irresponsibility.’<sup>58</sup> Having praised McMinnies’s overall interest in character, the *TLS* referred to Milton as ‘the type of charming but quite unscrupulous, not particularly venomous, but thoroughly venal rogue, who is perhaps the most dangerous type of all.’<sup>59</sup> *Books and Bookmen* confirmed the period’s pre-occupation with character: ‘The publishers assure us that this is not a political novel but one in which character is revealed against a background of racial antagonism.’<sup>60</sup>

In sum, British newspapers highlighted the mimetic qualities of McMinnies’s novel and her ability to create believable and engaging characters, all hallmarks of middlebrow fiction. Despite throwing a more ambivalent light on Britain’s colonial politics in Malaya than her readers would have encountered in the mainstream press, there is no evidence of reviewers taking issue with the novel’s political stance, even though some acknowledged its implied critique of colonial administrators. For most reviewers, *The Flying Fox*’s main interest stemmed from its central protagonists, and more specifically its ‘serious study of human motives and values.’<sup>61</sup> As such, it is more notable for its entertainment than for its didactic purpose, or as the author Gerald Hanley writes, ‘[i]t is full of charity and compassion. I read it at one sitting, unwilling to stop even for a moment.’<sup>62</sup>

McMinnies herself affirmed her commitment to the mimetic form of the novel, with characters and settings informed by careful observation of the external world, even as she distanced herself from its didactic function:

I think a message kills a story. A novel should be undidactic – simply as close a study as possible of contemporary life. You should never (a paraphrase of O. Wilde’s remark) be obliged to make up. My characters are composites of real characters, my situations happened, I never – or only very slightly, sometimes, invent. To be truthful, I don’t have to.<sup>63</sup>

She further expressed her affinity with the nineteenth-century realist novel:

I myself am a firm believer in a beginning, a middle, and an end. The less nonsense about story-telling the better – unless of course, you haven’t a story to tell. Then, I agree, one might be in a nasty predicament. Anyway, a form that was good enough for Dostoievsky and Thackeray should be good enough for any of us. I see no sense in experimenting with form while there are still so

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> John Davenport, ‘Corners of the Globe’, *Observer*, 18 March 1956, p. 17; John, 28 April 1956, p. 424.

<sup>57</sup> Edwards, p. 13.

<sup>58</sup> Scott-James, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Tylden-Wright, p. 217.

<sup>60</sup> [Anon.], ‘Peers, Police and the Great Panjandrum’, *Books and Bookmen*, February 1956, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Hewitt, p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> Advert in *Observer*, 11 March 1956, p. 17.

<sup>63</sup> McMinnies, MS undated, p. 4.

many good stories yet to be written which fit, perfectly well, into the existing, accepted one. Better devote one's energies to improving style, etc. – plenty of room for that!<sup>64</sup>

Both remarks place McMinnies at the heart of the post-war debate on the realist novel and the contested legacies of interwar modernism. Her reflections also suggest strong affinities with the middlebrow, even though she does not employ the term.

Lastly, British reviewers were particularly interested in McMinnies's perspective on colonial society. In the words of *The Times* reviewer, *The Flying Fox* is 'a searching, scathing investigation into the kind of people who govern post-war Malaya,' whereas the *Spectator* believed that its 'British officials and native notabilities are to type.'<sup>65</sup> Reviewers further underlined the novel's concern with social class, with the *Sunday Times* remarking: 'Mrs McMinnies provides an original and bracing comment on the social revolution,' singling out Doris Allingham: 'ex-barmaid, colonial wife [...] For good with Asians is exactly what Doris surprisingly was.'<sup>66</sup> A flavour of social snobbery transpired in the *Observer*'s comment: 'The remorseless vulgarity of the local English is brilliantly described.'<sup>67</sup> As such, the reviewers represent the typical reader's interest in social hierarchy, explored later in this chapter.

### **Diminished ambitions: The men of Telebu**

McMinnies had first-hand experience of the Emergency and its impact on the British expatriate community and the local population. Consequently, her novel provides a unique perspective on late colonial society. In this and the next section, I explore her fictional portrayal of the British men and women in Malaya. I also offer a brief comparison with Burgess's *Time for a Tiger*.

In *The Flying Fox*, colonial Telebu is depicted as an unattractive and run-down place, peopled with ordinary characters, who are content with a second-rate experience of empire.<sup>68</sup> Decay and mediocrity characterise the mainstays of social life: the swimming pool 'covered by a thick scum' (109); the Ladies' Room at the Club, 'a vault lit by a single bulb' (38); the Club itself 'had the seedy air of a NAAFI canteen' (33), while the colonial home is a run-down place, which no longer projects the image of British civilisation:

He glanced round the Rest House bedroom. [...] Plaster peeled from the walls, grey mounds of mosquito nets heaped over twin iron bedsteads, between the beds a night table with a jerry-pot, a lamp with a naked bulb, two chunky ash-trays advertising a brand of lager, and in one corner a huge black almeirah from which, when opened, there whirled a cloud of insects. (11)

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Edwards, p. 13; Daniel George, 'New Novels', *Spectator*, 30 March 1956, p. 419.

<sup>66</sup> Scott-James, p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> Davenport, p. 17.

<sup>68</sup> Britons in Malaya were profoundly upset at Noel Coward's description of Malaya as 'a first-rate country for second-rate people' (Shennan, p. 23).

Gone is the colonial home as a heaven of order and harmony, or the white settler as the plucky defender of empire.<sup>69</sup> Gone too are the heroic protagonists of imperial adventure novels, wholly committed to the ‘civilising’ project of empire. In common with Burgess – and before him Conrad – McMinnies questions the construction of the male hero and instead equates the imperial mission with individual ambition and greed: ‘It was an accepted rule,’ her narrator comments, ‘that a contract officer would spend his first couple of years paying off the debts incurred during the first month of his sojourn in the country’ (216), adding:<sup>70</sup>

If the reader is tempted to remark – but how foolish, to set forth on such a venture without a certain sum of money – then the reader is reminded that such a sum – say, three or four hundred pounds – would be precisely that, had he had it, which would have enabled our subject to pick and choose or even refuse such a job in the first place. Clearly, few men over thirty would accept a three-year contract in a bandit-ridden outpost of Empire without a very good reason. (217)

There are echoes too of Holtby’s *Mandoa, Mandoa!* (1933) and Orwell’s *Burmese Days* (1934), which had depicted imperial service as degraded and attracting individuals of second-rate ability. At the same time, Telebu’s officials have not fully abandoned the ‘civilising’ mission – nor their sense of moral superiority – and when Noel Allingham’s (Lucas’s assistant) acceptance of bribes is revealed, Lucas reminds him that ‘[v]enality [...] is a crime for the very good reason that it is no crime to the Asian, who is disposed to corruption from his mother’s tits onwards. It is our duty to educate him and to set an example’ (198).

On the whole, McMinnies’s characters no longer conform to the ideologically constructed image of the imperial hero or benevolent administrator, assured of his superiority and confident in his mission – Lucas dismisses the average expatriate as ‘U.K. throw-outs imported annually’ (228). Instead, her male protagonists capture a late colonial mood, keen to do a good job, but no longer expecting to experience the exotic East. Doing ‘the job there is to be done’ (229) is all that is left of the imperial mission, with the most senior British official in Telebu admitting that what motivates him is not ‘those dreary but rather important details – teaching people how to vote, how to keep clean and fed, how to run themselves so that when we leave them to it we can go with a moderately clear conscience’ (229-30), but the humbler realisation that ‘here – I shine’ (251). Interestingly, Lucas’s admission mirrors Maugham’s reflection on the ‘government servants, planters and traders, who spent their working lives in Malaya [...] ordinary people ordinarily satisfied with their station in life,’ who form the backbone of his Malaysian short stories.<sup>71</sup> Of note too is that McMinnies interrupts the Malayan narrative with four excerpts detailing Milton’s chequered personal history. Of all the characters featuring in *The Flying Fox*, his background story is the most developed. In doing so, she

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<sup>69</sup> Webster, *Englishness*, pp. 122-23; pp. 134-35.

<sup>70</sup> Whittle, p. 53; pp. 55-56.

<sup>71</sup> W. Somerset Maugham, ‘Preface’, in *Maugham’s Malaysian Stories* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969), pp. xviii-xix (p. xix). Similar reflections are recorded in his short stories. ‘They do their jobs competently and that’s what they’re here for,’ a character remarks in *Neil MacAdam*. W. Somerset Maugham, *Far Eastern Tales* (London Vintage Books: 2000), p. 195.

further undermines the notion of the exemplary colonial official, portraying Milton as a flawed fortune-seeker, who accidentally stumbles into a colonial role, which he does not particularly value and for which he is ill-suited: ‘you are a specially disrupting, if not corrupting, influence’ (228), Lucas judges.

*The Flying Fox* ends abruptly, not in colonial Telebu, but in Beirut, where Milton has landed in search of new opportunities. Unbeknownst to him, Margery’s plane has crashed over the Ionian Sea. As neither Milton nor Margery fit within the imperial mould – earlier Lucas remarks ironically: ‘Don’t spoil my illusions – it would be heartbreaking to discover you an Empire-builder under the skin’ (230) – this ending cannot be read as a nostalgic reflection on the lost glamour of colonial life. By concluding the novel with a description of the Halls’ final drunken moments in Singapore, Milton pouring himself a drink in Karachi airport and Margery falling asleep in the plane dizzy with champagne, McMinnies presents a picture of the Britons in Malaya that is at odds with the recollections of officials, who had left their colonial posts in the comforting knowledge that ‘[t]hey had stood for “decent, not very efficient but well-meaning government”’ and ‘left behind countries that were “prosperous and peaceful and well-governed.”’<sup>72</sup> In contrast, the Halls’ presence in the novel not only disrupts life in Telebu, but also denies the possibility of a morally uplifting narrative, which supports the global leadership role British politicians wanted to convey in the mid 1950s. McMinnies’s irreverent conclusion also departs from the melancholy endings of Leslie’s *Goat to Kali* and Huxley’s *A Thing to Love*, in that any nostalgic longing for the empire – predominant too in the memoirs of departing Britons – is erased, leaving the reader with the image of the failed colonial hero, who is trying his luck one more time.

McMinnies sketches a picture of colonial society that is remarkably similar to Burgess’s *Time for a Tiger*. Both novels show a British community living in much reduced circumstances, battling boredom and the oppressing heat through alcohol, and managing precarious relationships with the local tradesmen and police, debt and bribes in equal measure. There is a link too with earlier imperial fiction, as alcoholism featured prominently in Maugham’s short stories, along with the reduced financial circumstances of Britons in Malaya, in particular the planters who had suffered from the interwar fall in rubber prices. Similarly, alcohol serves as a trope of imperial decline and loss of confidence in Orwell’s *Burmese Days*.

McMinnies and Burgess further substitute a romanticised view of the glamorous East for a more mundane picture of life in a remote outpost of the empire, coupled with the exposition of their characters’ modest ambitions and moral weaknesses.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, as McMinnies and Burgess

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<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Charles Allen, *Tales from the South China Seas: Images of the British in South-East Asia in the Twentieth Century* (London: Futura, 1990), p. 303. To note that *Time for a Tiger* ends on a similarly disruptive note, with ‘the broken meats, the drained bottles, the insect noises, the gunfire, the snores and the retchings.’ Anthony Burgess, *The Malayan Trilogy* (London: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 186.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Where is this glamorous East they talk about?’ exclaims one of Burgess’s characters (Burgess, *Malayan Trilogy*, p. 34).

describe the loneliness and ennui of Britons living in distant, run-down locations, foregrounding their disloyalties and betrayals, they reprise Maugham's and Orwell's earlier depictions of the disappointments and disillusion of colonial life, even though they can no longer claim, as Maugham did, that conditions were peaceful with few signs of anti-British sentiment.<sup>74</sup> However, as I argue next, McMinnies departs from Burgess in offering a distinctly female perspective on Malayan society.

### **Promoting the 'New Look:' The women of Telebu**

If the British men in Telebu are presented as mediocre and content with second-rate glamour, McMinnies further reduces any remnants of exotic romanticism in her description of their wives: 'Little lakes of sweat formed in the pits under the eyes, a gentle stream flowed between the breasts of the women and down their legs; lipstick flaked off and faces were ghastly under a film of grease' (45). The portrayal of the women of Telebu is of interest as British women in colonial Malaya have received less critical attention than their counterparts in India or East Africa.<sup>75</sup> Women were largely confined to the domestic sphere, while joining their husbands in the club, on jungle hunts and on trips to the Cameron Highlands.<sup>76</sup> After the Second World War, they increasingly participated in professional and voluntary work in schools, hospitals, and in some instances, the New Villages.<sup>77</sup> They also ran Women's Institutes, which besides teaching nutrition and handicraft skills, were expected to discourage Malay women from supporting communist insurgents.<sup>78</sup>

The women in *The Flying Fox* are keenly aware that the glamour of colonial life is a thing of the past. Much of the narrative evolves around the daily lives of three women – Maud Lucas, Doris Allingham and Rose Farrar – who represent the various ranks of colonial society. As wife of the District Officer and Telebu's 'First Lady' (39), Maud quietly supports her husband in his mission and is respected by all others. Doris, married to Noel Allingham, is popular, enjoys gossiping and having 'lived most of her life in a Leicester suburb, thrived on mid-morning coffee, afternoon tea, laced with the heady spirit of rivalry' (53). Doris had been looking forward to 'the gongs, garlands, butlers galore' (55), having been briefed by her neighbour back home in Leicester who had lived in India and who had 'forecast the pleasures awaiting a mem out East' (54). She accepts that times have changed: 'Without wasting breath on bewailing the situation, Doris, undismayed, had breasted the wave of what was, had she known it, a revolution, and forged competently ahead' (55). Rose is positioned at the margins of this community, both because of her own distant manner and because of her husband's aloof and uncompromising character – 'Dismal Denys, his junior officers called him' (41).

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<sup>74</sup> Maugham, 'Preface', p. xix. See also Selina Hastings, *The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham* (London: John Murray, 2010), p. 280.

<sup>75</sup> An exception is Janice Brownfoot, 'Memsahibs in Colonial Malaya: A Study of European Wives in a British Colony and Protectorate, 1900-1940', in *The Incorporated Wife*, ed. by Hilary Callan and Shirley Ardener (London, Sydney and Dover: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 186-210.

<sup>76</sup> Shennan, pp. 267-76.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 442-44.

<sup>78</sup> The Women's Institutes were an initiative of Lady Templer (*ibid.*, pp. 440-43).



For the British women, social interaction with Malayan women is part of their duty as colonial wives. But for McMinnies's critical narrator, the 'New Look,' defined as 'the duty of Europeans to get to know Asians and treat them with respect – and understand them' (121), is merely another form of British paternalism:

They sat up on the alert, adjusting their varying expressions to a universal one of enthusiasm, adopting, too, an identical manner, a blend of fourth-form skittishness and prefectorial heartiness, which, understandably, became some better than others. This was the approach, no mere whim of fashion, but a cut-and-dried policy by which their husbands stood to gain or lose, which Vivian Lucas, in his rare moments of flippancy called the 'New Look.' (54)

This is by no means an equal relationship and McMinnies draws on a range of racial stereotypes, including a curious metaphor of birds:

Now there was a fluttering, a twittering on the doorstep and three Malay ladies, dressed in spangles, scarves, bangles were driven into the room, propelled from the rear by the largest coal-black duck of a woman ever seen; [...] Everyone rose, the mems vying with each other to put the newcomers at their ease until the Malays were persuaded to subside on to the sofa, where they sat huddled together like hens on a perch. (55)

Furthermore, she exposes the racial discourse implicit in the 'New Look' policy through her female characters, Doris in particular: 'You get a lot of Asians here Saturday night, so Maud and me, we always try and turn up Saturdays. It's a great help, my hubby says – makes them feel at home' (39). At the same time, there is an element of ambivalence in the narrator's praise of Doris's commitment: 'Doris *was* good with Asians; she alone of all the mems present, with her sound Midlands common sense, had seized the situation up' (54).<sup>79</sup> In contrast, McMinnies's Asian characters condemn the 'New Look' as '[a]n uncomfortable fashion for us all' (121) and a 'frillery' (166). As such the novel's dialogism allows for a limited degree of scrutiny, registering the persistence of imperial discourse and the narrow outlook of those who continue to subscribe to its underlying racial superiority, as well as a faint critique of the British attempt at defining Malaya's future.

McMinnies's depiction of the women of Telebu marks her novel as distinct from the male fiction of the period, which typically evolves around the experiences of British men stationed in Malaya. In doing so, she confirms the metropolitan perception of British Malaya as a superficial and hard-drinking community, whose women share their husbands' casual racism. But she also critiques her female characters' continued commitment to their public role as partners in the 'civilising' mission of empire, as they support the benevolent paternalism their husbands bring to their colonial jobs. More overtly political, this picture is absent in Burgess's and Sillitoe's fiction, as well as in their literary predecessors' work.

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<sup>79</sup> Italics in original.

### **Class in the late colony: A middlebrow perspective**

The British community in Malaya was far from homogenous. Colonial Malaya attracted Britons from a wide range of social and professional backgrounds to work in the country's plantations, tin mines, shipyards and other industries, as well as the civil service, police and military. As in other parts of the empire, class differences, reflecting people's background back in Britain and their professional status abroad, manifested themselves through material distinctions, such as dress or club membership.<sup>80</sup> It is this society that is at the heart of Maugham's frequently acerbic short stories written in the 1920s and 1930s. After the Second World War, the British community became more inclusive, with a new generation of expatriates replacing 'old hands,' and socialising with Europeans and Asians alike.<sup>81</sup> At the same time, many continued to enjoy the perks of colonial life, although in remote areas, social life was severely curtailed during the Emergency.<sup>82</sup>

In *The Flying Fox's* expatriate community, social status is signified by dress and culinary taste. Descriptions of fashion, food and the home convey a class consciousness, frequently focalised through Doris, whose clothes are described as 'a bit bright' (22), her manners too forthright – 'Doris, in apricot satin, bent low over him' (99) – and her morals questionable:

'If someone gives you a nice present you do what you can for them. That's business wherever you are. Common sense, I call it. We've got one or two nice little bits and pieces,' she went on comfortably, 'and I am sure I can't see the harm in it. [...] Why, it's no different from England come Christmas. My pop, for instance, a ham here, a case of Scotch there. It's quite the thing.'  
(194)

Despite a shared commitment to the 'New Look,' class distinctions matter, as Doris admits: 'I used to be a barmaid. 'Course, I never let on – Noel, my hubby, 'd have a fit – sticky bunch they are here' (105). Ironically, while Dior's eponymous New Look appealed to women of all classes, as Carol Dyhouse observes, it reinvented traditional femininity with its class-based hierarchical associations.<sup>83</sup> Less affluent women created their own copies, much like Doris on her Singer machine – 'Just follow the pattern and Bob's your uncle' (39) – merely underlining existing class divisions.

According to Humble, middlebrow novels frequently adopt a condescending attitude towards the lower middle classes, describing their tastes as vulgar and deriding their social ambitions.<sup>84</sup> But whilst attempting to establish upper middle-class values as hegemonic, these novels also present upper-middle-class characters as arrogant and unkind in their relationships with the lower classes.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, Elizabeth Maslen observes that although the working classes are given a voice in 1950s

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<sup>80</sup> Shennan, pp. 202-03; pp. 447-48; p. 451; Allen, *South China Sea*, pp. 20-23; pp. 72-74.

<sup>81</sup> Harper, 'British "Malayans"', pp. 260-61; Shennan, pp. 451-52.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 445-54.

<sup>83</sup> Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: History, Women, Feminism* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2010), p. 90.

<sup>84</sup> Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, pp. 81-85.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

fiction, all too often ‘the standards of the “British way of life” remain stubbornly defined by southern middle-class practice.’<sup>86</sup>

Whereas Humble and Maslen discuss this class ambivalence in the context of metropolitan fiction, *The Flying Fox* reveals a similar tension in the late colonial setting, its attention to domestic detail and its implied commentary exposing anxieties about status and inter-class envy:

small it may be but clean, cleaner than yours, Maud, yours Rose – the lemon sponge risen a treat, the guest towels laid out, the toilet sparkling – for you never know, do you, and you may not remember, Maud, but *I* shall not forget that time we went upstairs after your dinner party and those undies in the basin – *I* should have died. (53)<sup>87</sup>

The middlebrow’s ambivalence about class is visible too in McMinnies’s portrayal of her female characters. As senior *mem*, Maud’s causal, yet stylish way of dressing – ‘She was wearing dark-blue jeans and a check shirt, plenty of lipstick and bracelets; she looked comfortable but not in the least messy’ (28) – is presented as superior to Doris, who ‘twirled around in her frilly gingham dress. Mrs Allingham had stout upper arms, now considerably exposed, and a determined chin. The innocent starchiness of the dress might have suited a girl of eighteen’ (39). Yet, their different notions of hospitality are likely to solicit the reader’s sympathy for the latter:

‘What a spread, Doris, my dear ... you must have been at it for hours.’

Two hours, Maud, two hours by the clock – though catch me telling you – but as if at the wave of a mysterious wand, at Maud’s words the butter began to ooze, the icing seemed vulgarly bright, and there was a sudden unmistakable whiff of fish paste. *I* don’t care, Doris said to herself – better than Marie biscuits and that soppy China tea without milk. (53)<sup>88</sup>

Class, represented by food, fashion and home interiors, also invites moral judgement on character, as can be seen in the figure of Margery, who is compared unfavourably with both Doris and Maud, displaying neither the good-heartedness of the former, nor the steadfastness of the latter. Despite her upper middle-class background – Margery hails from a well-off provincial background and calls on a contact in the Colonial Office to obtain Milton his Malayan posting (209) – her dress marks her as unsuitable for colonial life: ‘As a matter of fact, no, not hats,’ Maud remarks on their first encounter, ‘[b]ut that one is a perfect duck’ (28). Margery is presented as weak – ‘she drank to escape’ (245) – and failing in her domestic duties – ‘Nothing was very clean but then she would scarcely have noticed if the house were positively dirty’ (215).

In the colonial context, class markers are complicated further as they are associated with imperial decline. Lucas comments on the reduced aspirations of middle-class colonial servants by referring to their cultural and culinary tastes:

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<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women’s Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 134.

<sup>87</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>88</sup> Italics in original.

The Europeans who come out here, Milton, are solid, normal middle-class folk; cheerful, gregarious, and not hard to please. Most of them are prepared to do an honest job of work in return for the obvious perks – nothing grand, mark you, nothing café-society – the Tennis Club hop, Book Society choice, Madame Butterfly in the Town Hall. Tinned food doesn't worry them, and they're happy with wine, red or white, as supplied by Wong. They live better than they would be able to afford to do at home – in other words, they're satisfied. And a good thing too – no point in yearning for things you can't have. Oh, I dare say you think it's all second-rate. It is. (229)<sup>89</sup>

The colonial experience having lost its glamour and purpose, 1950s Britain represents a more attractive prospect for the aspiring lower middle classes. For Doris, suburban England trumps the allure of the empire:

Suddenly she felt homesick; for Sainsbury's on a Saturday, shopping-baskets digging into you and fowls laid out plucked on the counter – not cackling their heads off like in the market here; she had never had to draw a fowl before, disgusting. And proper crabs, sterilised scarlet, gleaming like berries through a frosty morning on the slab outside Mac Fisheries – not like here, where you peered into a stinking crate and the Chinaman tickled the awful black shapes crawling inside, [...] Ugh! Yet no one could dress a nice boiled crab as she could. A nice North Sea crab, that was to say. (194)

In sum, *The Flying Fox* describes a community that, despite its remoteness, would have been recognisable to its metropolitan readership. Food, fashion and the home, accustomed markers of class in the domestic middlebrow novel, bring to life women's class anxieties in metropolis and colony alike, capturing the shared experience of belonging described by Berlant.<sup>90</sup> The tropes also help bridge the gap between metropolitan perceptions of colonial life and the experiences of those who had intimate knowledge of life in a remote colonial outpost. Furthermore, by recruiting the tropes of the domestic alongside the exotic, McMinnies brings the familiar world of the domestic novel into the unfamiliar colonial arena. But the juxtaposition of the two sets of tropes can also be read as signifying the transition from the exhausted imperial ideology to a more optimistic domestic rhetoric – the 'affluent society,' discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 – suggesting that McMinnies expresses an emergent public sentiment, not present in the more nostalgic texts by Leslie and Huxley.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

As shown in this chapter, McMinnies employs narrative conventions associated with the political middlebrow to interrogate British colonial politics in Malaya. Drawing on personal experience, she produces a narrative which combines fact and fiction, and employs a diverse cast of characters to debate the key elements of Britain's counterinsurgency response. In common with Huxley's *A Thing to Love* and Leslie's *Goat to Kali*, *The Flying Fox* casts doubt on official attempts to present

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<sup>89</sup> To note that Maugham's interwar stories too described the Britons in Malaya as second-rate, as in this extract from *The Door of Opportunity*: 'The men had come out to the colony as lads from second-rate schools. [...] They read nothing worth reading. Their ambition was to be like everybody else.' Maugham, *Far Eastern Tales*, p. 96.

<sup>90</sup> Berlant, p. viii.

<sup>91</sup> Whittle, p. 2; p. 138.

decolonisation as a well-managed process, with Britain carefully guiding its former colony to independence.

Of particular interest to her 1956 reviewers, McMinnies's portrayal of the British men and women in Malaya signifies the loss of imperial confidence and authority in a manner reminiscent of Maugham's stories of interwar Malaya and seen too in Burgess's near-contemporaneous novel. However, her use of the tropes of the female middlebrow presents late colonial Malaya in a different light, bringing women's role in supporting the institutions of empire to the fore. Additionally, by redeploying the tropes of the domestic in the colonial context, McMinnies attends to anxieties of her post-war readers about social class and cultural taste, whilst at the same time negotiating the gap between metropolitan and colonial sensitivities.

McMinnies's novel deserves to be better known, as her engagement with late colonial politics and her innovative use of the tropes of the female middlebrow shed light on aspects of the history of decolonisation that have received less critical attention. Additionally, *The Flying Fox* exemplifies the ability of the female middlebrow to capture the tensions and contradictions of significant historical moments.

The three novels studied in Part I of this thesis illustrate the intense engagement of women's fiction with the politics of decolonisation. For Leslie, Huxley and McMinnies, the difficult process of handing over political power is at the heart of their respective novels, and a central role is given to those involved in political negotiations, insurgencies and counterinsurgency operations. Yet, contemporary reviewers frequently fail to engage with the novels' political discourse. Instead, what emerges from the period's literary reviews is that the relationship between the author and her metropolitan reader rests on the former's ability to produce a close study of contemporary life in the distant colony. Invariably, reviewers praise the novels' documentary and dialogic qualities, key attributes of the political middlebrow. But while they reflect positively on the authors' fairness when representing divergent viewpoints, the reviewers appear less attuned to the ideological faultlines that are visible in the respective narratives. Rather, they underline the importance of strong plot lines, conclusive endings, and believable and engaging characters, suggesting that the expectation of an agreeable reading experience outweighs the didactic opportunities associated with the political middlebrow.

## PART II: DECOLONISATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Decolonisation involved not only the struggle between anti-colonial insurgents and the departing colonial authorities, or the hand-over of political power and dismantling of colonial institutions, but also brought about a change in international relationships, as newly independent states sought to establish their position in the post-war world order. Part II of this thesis explores how the female middlebrow novel engages with the politics and economics of decolonisation during the early years of independence, covering the period's dominant development discourse, and the confluence of Cold War geopolitics and global capitalism. Part II also expands the scope of analysis, as it introduces the novels of two diasporic authors and reads their work within the broader context of Anglo-American middlebrow fiction.

Significantly, both novels in Part II centre their narrative on the construction of large dams, thereby participating in the post-war debate on the role of these giant engineering projects in raising the economic prospects of developing countries. Yet, dams also acquired symbolic significance, projecting what the historian Sunil Khilnani calls a 'big, audacious' future.<sup>1</sup> They captured the imagination of Nehru and other postcolonial leaders, symbolising human progress and the might of the newly independent nation-state.<sup>2</sup> Not all commentators shared this optimism, with the novelists in Part II of this thesis providing a distinctly less upbeat assessment.

### CHAPTER 4: DECOLONISATION, DEVELOPMENT AND COLD WAR POLITICS: HAN SUYIN, *THE MOUNTAIN IS YOUNG* (1958)

#### Introduction

In May 1956, Han Suyin attended the coronation of King Mahendra of Nepal (r. 1955-1972). Both the lavish ceremonies and Nepal's strategic position in South Asia attracted official representatives from all major powers, alongside the world's media corps. Together with the tourists and climbers who had recently discovered the beauty of the country and extolled the exoticism of its customs, they would make up the vast cast of characters in Han's fictional account of the event, *The Mountain Is Young*, published in May 1958.<sup>3</sup> This chapter argues that her semi-autobiographical novel can be viewed as exemplary of the political middlebrow, as Han mounts a critical debate on Cold War politics, the role of development and the environmental impact of Western aid in Nepal, thus affirming the political ambitions of the female middlebrow novel.

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<sup>1</sup> Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2001), pp. 236-37; Daniel Klingensmith, 'One Valley and a Thousand: Dams, Nationalism, and Development' (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 239-40.

<sup>3</sup> Han Suyin, *The Mountain Is Young* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958). All references will be to this edition and will be inserted parenthetically into the text. Quotes use Han's spelling of 'Khatmandu.'

At the novel's heart is the romantic encounter between Anne Ford, unhappy in her marriage to John, ex-colonial administrator, and Unni Menon, a South Indian engineer leading the construction of a giant dam in the Himalayan foothills.<sup>4</sup> Anne has arrived in Kathmandu to take up a teaching position and find inspiration for her writing. Despite her preference for solitary walks, she is drawn into the social life of the city, frequenting the Royal Hotel, where all foreign visitors gather, and the Serene Palace, home of General Kumar, generous host and confidant to Anne and Unni.<sup>5</sup> A secondary plot line, injecting a comic element, involves the medical doctor Fred Maltby and his eccentric wife Eudora, whom he has tried to evade for over a decade, only to find that she has arrived in Kathmandu to witness the coronation. The novel's title refers both to the geological age of the Himalayas and the beauty of Nepal's mountains and valleys.

*The Mountain Is Young* was published in London and New York and became a *New York Times* bestseller that same year.<sup>6</sup> It has been re-issued in paperback, most recently in 1992. The novel has, however, received limited scholarly attention, whereas the broader academic focus has been on Han's life writing and autobiographical fiction.<sup>7</sup> In a recent article, Alex Tickell discusses Han's use of the middlebrow romance form in *The Mountain Is Young* and its 'highly symbolic inter-ethnic intimacy,' reading the love-affair between Anne and Unni within a broader Cold War integrationist context.<sup>8</sup> He further observes that Han re-writes the inter-ethnic romance and encourages her Western readers to consider new possibilities for "'affectively" imagining difference,' whilst also creating a fictional bridge between the personal and the political.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter extends Tickell's research in two main ways: formally, by revisiting the novel's documentary and dialogic qualities; and thematically, by augmenting his focus on Cold War cultural politics with an evaluation of Han's treatment of Cold War geopolitics and her critical engagement with the period's discourse of development. Specifically, my first objective is to examine to what extent Han's novel produces the 'marriage of art and politics' of the political middlebrow.<sup>10</sup> In common with the women writers studied in Part I, Han draws on her journalistic output, notably when describing the 1956 coronation of the King of Nepal and the country's uneasy position in the Cold

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<sup>4</sup> Shortly after her arrival in Kathmandu, Han met her future husband Vincent Ratnaswamy, a South Indian military engineer, who was working on the construction of a road. Han Suyin, *My House Has Two Doors* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), pp. 106-08.

<sup>5</sup> The Royal Hotel is mentioned in Han's autobiography, alongside its owner Boris Lyssanovich, key promoter of Nepalese nascent tourism, (ibid., pp. 104-5). See also Ed Douglas, *Himalaya: A Human History* (London: Vintage, 2021), pp. 469-70.

<sup>6</sup> Paramount acquired rights to film the novel (Thomas M. Pryor, 'Paramount Plans Filming in Nepal: Han Suyin Novel to Be Shot on Location Next Year', *New York Times*, 14 July 1958, p. 16). It is not clear why the project did not materialise.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Alex Tickell, 'Life-Writing, Testimony and Biographical Fiction', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 10: The Novel in South and South East Asia since 1945*, ed. by Alex Tickell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 428-42 (pp. 432-35).

<sup>8</sup> Alex Tickell, 'Han Suyin's Cold War Fictions: Life-Writing, Intimacy, and Decolonization', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 57:2 (2021), 241-54 (p. 251).

<sup>9</sup> Tickell, 'Cold War Fictions', p. 252.

<sup>10</sup> Vaninskaya, p. 175.

War power struggle. Additionally, her developing interest in the politics of Non-Alignment – the April 1955 Bandung conference had set the stage for a new spirit of Third World solidarity, soon referred to as the ‘Bandung spirit’ – drives both her fiction and non-fiction.<sup>11</sup> Focusing on the synergies between fact and fiction, I argue that *The Mountain Is Young* offers an insightful contemporary critique of Cold War geopolitics as played out in South Asia.

My second objective is to explore to what extent *The Mountain Is Young* expresses Cold War structures of feeling and exhibits what Raymond Williams calls those ‘meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt,’ and which come to define a particular generation or period.<sup>12</sup> Cold War middlebrow fiction is saturated with fear and paranoia, supporting the period’s anti-communist rhetoric and producing what Klein terms a global imaginary of containment.<sup>13</sup> But, equally, this fiction captures an imaginary of integration, which according to Klein represents the Cold War as ‘an opportunity to forge intellectual and emotional bonds with the people of Asia and Africa,’ and calls for a sentimental mode of expression.<sup>14</sup> Building on Klein’s conceptual framework, Tickell concludes that it is the central romance in Han’s novel which gives expression to the period’s global imaginary of integration and situates *The Mountain Is Young* within post-war middlebrow culture.<sup>15</sup> Here I argue that when shifting the focus away from the central romance onto the secondary characters, a more complicated engagement with Cold War cultural politics emerges, showcasing the prevalence of the imaginary of containment and the limits of the imaginary of integration.

A distinguishing feature of Han’s novel is that she combines elements of the political middlebrow, the female romance and the fictional autobiography, whilst creating vivid and memorable characters, whose emotional inner lives are likely to be of interest to the middlebrow reader. In her later autobiography Han reported that many contemporary readers responded strongly to the representation of intimacy, particularly her portrayal of Anne’s Indian lover.<sup>16</sup> Continuing my study of the middlebrow’s political resonance, I study the contemporary readers’ responses to the insertion of political themes into this romantic plot. I am interested too in reviewers’ assessment of the

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher, J. Lee, ‘Introduction: Between a Moment and an Era: The Origins and Afterlives of Bandung’, in *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives* (second edition), ed. by Christopher, J. Lee (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), pp. 1-42 (p. 15). Han did not attend Bandung, but participated in later events, such as for example the Afro-Asian Writers Conferences held in the late 1950s and 1960s. See Fiona Lee, ‘Neutralizing English: Han Suyin and the Language Politics of Third World Literature’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 57:2 (2021), 226-40 (p. 228; pp. 230-32).

<sup>12</sup> Williams, *Marxism*, pp. 131-32.

<sup>13</sup> Klein, pp. 32-37. Hammond discusses literary containment in British fiction (pp. 23-32). On the expression of Cold War anxiety in British and American fiction, see Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Klein, p. 23; pp. 41-43.

<sup>15</sup> Tickell, ‘Cold War Fictions’, pp. 251-52. See also Klein, pp. 11-17.

<sup>16</sup> Han, *My House*, p. 216.



novel's documentary qualities, considering the heightened public interest in the Himalayan region since the successful ascent of Everest in 1953.<sup>17</sup>

My final contribution concerns Han's fictional engagement with the discourse of development and the role of foreign aid as a geopolitical tool, topics she would revisit in subsequent journalistic writing.<sup>18</sup> Here, I focus on her use of the narrative strategies of the female middlebrow to interrogate the post-war debate on economic growth, led by male academics and politicians. As I will demonstrate, Han's fictional characters debate the Western notion of development, defined in terms of economic progress and modernisation; the benefits brought by international capital and Western technology; and the 'uneven development' characterising neocolonial systems. Han's novel also offers a critique of the environmental destruction caused by Western investments, thus anticipating the interests of postcolonial ecocriticism. Expanding on ecocriticism, which is commonly defined as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, postcolonial ecocriticism is concerned with the ecological legacy of imperialism, as well as the impact of policies pursued by newly independent nations.<sup>19</sup> While these issues are typically discussed in relation to later postcolonial authors – Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh in particular – here I want to advance the argument that Han – and as we shall see in the next chapter, Markandaya – raise similar concerns in their middlebrow novels of the 1950s and 1960s.

Nepal has a relatively minor presence in British fiction. Its mountains feature in imperial adventure novels, with intrepid Victorian and Edwardian travellers venturing into remote areas along the borders with China, India and Tibet. From Kipling's *Kim* (1901) to James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933) and Godden's *Black Narcissus* (1939), these novels paint the Himalayan region in romantic terms, emphasising its beauty and its mystery, whilst registering its significance as a strategic border zone.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Han's novel depicts a newly opened Nepal, with tourists, climbers, photographers and foreign aid workers joining the more traditional protagonists of imperial fiction: missionary teachers, colonial officials and retired army officers. As I will show in this chapter, this diverse international cast and the novel's explicit engagement with decolonisation, Cold War politics and economic development mark *The Mountain Is Young* as radically different from its literary predecessors.

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<sup>17</sup> Popular accounts of the expedition include John Hunt, *The Ascent of Everest* (1953) and James [Jan] Morris, *Coronation Everest* (1958).

<sup>18</sup> Tickell mentions the themes of modernization and development but does not expand ('Cold War Fictions', pp. 250-51).

<sup>19</sup> Useful surveys are: Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (second edition), (London and New York: Routledge, 2012); Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (second edition), (London and New York: Routledge, 2015); Anthony Carrigan, 'Nature, Ecocriticism, and the Postcolonial Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Postcolonial Novel*, ed. by Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 81-98.

<sup>20</sup> Luree Miller, 'The Himalayas in Fact and Fiction', in *Asia in Western Fiction*, ed. by Robin W. Winks and James R. Rush (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), pp. 85-99 (pp. 86-90). For a discussion of *Lost Horizon* as exemplary of the middlebrow novel, see Jeffrey Mather, 'Captivating Readers: Middlebrow Aesthetics and James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*', *The CEA Critic*, 79:2 (2017), 231-43.

### **Han Suyin, Nepal and Cold War geopolitics**

In June 1956, Han wrote a short piece for the London magazine *Eastern World*, describing the preparations for King Mahendra's coronation and its 'truly magnificent ceremonies, [...] the splendour and the colour of the pageants and the processions, the pomp of the elephants caparisoned in gold and silver' – exotic detail which would be re-employed in her novel.<sup>21</sup> Han is full of praise: 'It was a remarkable achievement to lodge, feed, and keep bodily happy so many people, to do it with so much urbanity and good nature.'<sup>22</sup> Her article also highlights the country's initial steps towards modernity:

But this cleaning of temples and palaces was not what the Nepalese themselves considered important – what did interest them was their new roads and avenues, the stadium, the State Bank, the buildings at the airport ... all the permanent improvements, which, long after the Coronation was a pleasant happy memory, would remain to them.<sup>23</sup>

Characterising the coronation as an opportunity for international diplomacy, Han notes that the airport was built with help from Indian Army engineers, taxis were imported from Calcutta and Delhi, and special representations were made by the Government of India and the Chinese Ambassador to India and Nepal. Of interest too is the presence of the international media: '[T]his was the first time that correspondents from every part of the world, plus film companies, were admitted and given all facilities to photograph and report practically every item of the ceremonies.'<sup>24</sup> She further reports on the King's achievements since succeeding his father King Tribhuvan a year earlier:

Membership of the UN, renewal of diplomatic relations with China; help and cooperation with India, Britain and the US. Matters of domestic importance were the Act giving rights of citizenship, the land reforms scheme, compensation for political victims in land and money, establishment of the State Bank and overhaul of the judiciary.<sup>25</sup>

She concludes the article on a positive note:

Nepal, though proud of the past, and keeping to her temples and the beauty she has created, is also profoundly interested in a better future. Under the thoughtful leadership of King Mahendra, I felt that there was a good chance that these reforms, so necessary, might be carried out without needless violence and destruction.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, despite Han's optimistic prognostics, Nepal was only just emerging from a period of political instability. In 1951, the autocratic Rana family, which had held the hereditary prime minister seat, was overthrown and King Tribhuvan was able to return after a brief period of exile in India. Both King Tribhuvan and his son King Mahendra promised general elections, but these would not take place until 1959. In 1960, King Mahendra suspended the constitution and dissolved the elected parliament. Nepal would be ruled as an absolute monarchy until his son restored democracy in 1990.

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<sup>21</sup> Han Suyin, 'Coronation in Nepal', *Eastern World*, 10:6 (1956), p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Having enjoyed the support from the Indian government in the early days of his reign, King Mahendra pursued a foreign policy of neutrality between China and India throughout the 1960s. The country received, however, considerable economic and technical support from the United States, and was viewed by the latter as a strategic bulwark against China and the Soviet Union, in particular after the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, US foreign policy was focused on reducing Nepal's poverty and promoting economic development, in an attempt to stem the spread of communism.<sup>27</sup> The USA was keen too for Nepal to preserve its independence and curtail Soviet and Chinese influence, resulting in ambiguous diplomacy which supported the monarchy, but did not press for the restoration of democracy.<sup>28</sup> In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the USA was Nepal's largest donor, followed by India in second place, most of it aimed at infrastructure projects and education.<sup>29</sup>

Britain played a secondary role in this global power play. It had recognised Nepal's independence as far back as 1923, and a new treaty of friendship signed in 1950 secured further aid and cooperation for the country. In the public domain, Nepal was associated with the 1953 conquest of Everest, presented in the media as both a British and a Commonwealth achievement.<sup>30</sup> When news of New Zealander Edmund Hillary's and Nepalese climber Tenzing Norgay's triumph was broadcast to the world on the eve of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, it contributed to the celebration of a new Elizabethan Age and cemented the Commonwealth narrative of an 'equal partnership of nations and races.'<sup>31</sup>

### **Cold War geopolitics and the coronation in *The Mountain Is Young***

With these broad considerations in mind, I now turn to Han's narrative treatment of the coronation.<sup>32</sup> While featuring as the backdrop for her romance story, the coronation is the subject too of extensive commentary by the third-person narrator. Yet as I will show in this section, Han's narrator departs from her earlier article in *Eastern World* by adopting a less laudatory tone. In *Eastern World*, Han is pre-occupied more with presenting an attractive picture of the various ceremonies, and less with conveying any underlying diplomatic tensions. In contrast, her novel foregrounds the diplomatic complications and 'tragedies of protocol, precedence and diplomacy' (215):

A Chinese Vice-Premier and a Chinese Ambassador from what was called in Khatmandu 'the real China' would come as official guests, for Nepal had now recognized Peking [...] the fifty strong United States Point Four Mission must not be seen anywhere near the Chinese delegation at any function, cocktails, dinners, garden parties.

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<sup>27</sup> Narayan Khadka, 'U.S. Aid to Nepal in the Cold War Period: Lessons for the Future', *Pacific Affairs*, 73:1 (2000), 77-95.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-83.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-85.

<sup>30</sup> Webster, *Englishness*, pp. 93-95.

<sup>31</sup> Queen Elizabeth II, *Christmas Broadcast 1953* <<https://www.royal.uk/christmas-broadcast-1953>>. See also Webster, *Englishness*, p. 93.

<sup>32</sup> Han's *My House* briefly mentions the coronation, with no reference to the diplomatic tensions (p. 111).

[...]

rumour in the vicinity of the U.S.I.S. Library affirmed that the Nepalese were aggrieved at the Chinese because they, the Nepalese, had issued invitations to the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama of Tibet to attend the Coronation, and the Chinese would not let them come. (215-16)

Of note is that much of the commentary on the coronation is communicated through a highly critical and at times ironic narrator: 'Every diplomat of Khatmandu, and all the first, second, third secretaries and trade and cultural attachés went round with the harassed and intent look of birds in search of a mate' (215). The narrator is equally direct in their criticism of the lack of preparation: 'Three weeks before the Coronation diplomatic frenzy had reached a peak of confusion. [...] Nothing seemed planned at all' (217). Adopting a distinctly Western perspective, the narrator further observes that '[t]he only diplomats to remain unruffled were the Indians. Seasoned in haphazardness, they knew the best of plans altered by rain or natural calamity, [...] There was no reason to worry unduly; everything would happen in due course' (217-18). But the narrator also mocks the Western obsession with time keeping and proceeds to describe Western diplomats sending 'frantic cables and counter-cables, with coded orders timing and mistiming functions, and yet other cables cancelling all previous cables, until even the Indian patience of the operators became exhausted by the sound and fury of the Westerners' (218). Amidst this frenzied activity – 'No one knew what the Chinese were up to' (218) – and in a direct swipe at China's political ideology, the narrator asserts: 'Although the Chinese are maniacally tidy, and this fanatical orderliness was now worsened by a political theory which thought it could sweep minds as tidy and clean as it regimented bodies, yet they seemed strangely unruffled' (218). At this point in the narrative, Han's narrator appears highly ambivalent, criticising both Chinese policy and Western suspicion, and mocking Western 'prophecy [of] disaster' (218).

The narrator continues their ironic commentary when describing the arrival of the world's media:

Five shifts of airplanes a day have brought, yesterday and today, the hordes of the Press. [...] By noon the air is full of competition and rivalry, the tables crowded with men and women with their backs firmly turned to the sun and the Valley, and their faces magnetized to each other. The Coronation, suddenly, has become something to be written up, adjectivally, in all its verbal aspects. (327)

This time the narrator's criticism is aimed at the arrogance of the Western press, who decide to take matters in their own hands, printing a press bulletin, which will 'tell them exactly what to do, where to go, and when: "Can't rely on the Nepalese to tell you anything. We'll do it ourselves"' (328). Hence, through her narrator, Han casts a critical eye on media coverage of the coronation, drawing attention to the intrusive presence of Western journalists – at some point they surround the Purification hut, shoving 'aside each other to within inches of the King's nose' (366) – and the limitations of their discourse, casting doubt on the possibility of any objective reporting by the West.

In sum, Han's blend of fact and fiction contributes to the documentary quality of her novel, a characteristic of the political middlebrow more generally. Through the critical voice of the third-person narrator, she highlights various political faultlines, including the American refusal to recognise

the People's Republic of China and its frustration with China's annexation of Tibet. Of note too is that India is presented as a neutral party, while no mention is made of the official British delegation, thus illustrating the new global power relationships. As seen earlier, Han's own reporting in *Eastern World* combines respectful coverage of the ceremony with praise for the King's modernisation plans, leaving aside any geopolitical tensions. By contrast, in her novel, she adds a critical edge to her report by speaking through an assertive narrator. Interestingly, in Huxley's case, the third-person narrator is less forthright and, as shown in Chapter 2, we had to look to the author's non-fiction for a more incisive commentary.

### **Cold War cultural politics and the middlebrow novel**

Cold War middlebrow texts, Klein explains, abound with exchanges between Americans and (non-communist) Asians: 'intellectual exchanges of conversation, economic exchanges of shopping, emotional exchanges of love, physical exchanges of tourism and immigration.'<sup>33</sup> Typically featuring sympathetic Asian characters, who adopt a quasi-educational role as they 'explain' the East to their Western interlocutors and promote mutual understanding, these texts exemplify the sentimentalist discourse of integration Klein associates with the middlebrow.<sup>34</sup> A prominent example of the middlebrow's discourse of integration is *The Ugly American* (1958) by William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, published four months after Han's novel, and arguably participating in a similar structure of feeling. A collection of interrelated and fact-based stories, *The Ugly American* depicts the behaviours of Americans in Southeast Asia. Its characters are divided into two groups: 'ugly' and 'non-ugly,' the former portrayed as imperialist, racist and anti-communist; the latter as kind, committed to the work on the ground and keen to form friendships with local people and learn their language.<sup>35</sup>

At first sight, a similar narrative strategy is at work in *The Mountain Is Young*, which is built around a series of encounters, held in the margin of the coronation, and which act as opportunities for friendly intellectual debate between Europeans and Asians. As I show in this section, a more ambivalent picture emerges when concentrating on the novel's secondary characters, whose lively conversations give the novel its dialogic character.

I start the discussion with four characters, who represent the middlebrow's interest in cross-cultural alliances and its sentimentalist discourse: the English doctor Frederic (Fred) Maltby and his wife Eudora; the Nepali General Kumar and his cousin the Field Marshall. Fred, Chief Medical Officer at Kathmandu's newly established hospital, has fallen in love with the country and its people, as 'here, more than anywhere else, human contact, touching a human hand, looking into human eyes, made one believe in God, or the gods' (59). Eudora, freshly arrived in Kathmandu, is committed to

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<sup>33</sup> Klein, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-16; p. 65; Radway, p. 284-85; p. 294.

<sup>35</sup> Klein, pp. 85-89.

getting to know ‘the real Nepalese, the true values of Nepalese life’ (251). Well-meaning and naively viewing herself as ‘Mother Asia’ (251), she worries that her compatriots are ‘cutting themselves off from the life of the people. [...] she felt that she alone had penetrated to the hearts of Asians’ (251). Yet, both are aware of the country’s problems and question the presence of Western experts. Fred is aghast at the poverty, malnutrition and superstition he witnesses:

It made him sound a cynic and shocked himself to maintain that the pot-bellied, red-haired babies with enormously long lashes, who squatted on diminutive legs, passive, their skin a coppery brown (a recognized disease entity due to protein deficiency), under the carved snakes and peacocks and gods of the dark, medieval houses, were not really feeling unhappy; that when one saw the hill people half-naked in the biting cold wind, laughing and singing though blue with cold, this euphoria was due to the fact that in a state of chronic malnutrition their feelings of pain were blunted. (59)

Frequently despairing at the lack of basic hygiene measures, he consoles himself with the belief that he is ‘making time run, transporting an eleventh-century country into the twentieth’ (123). Eudora condemns Western imperialism: ‘I disapprove totally, absolutely, of imperialism which takes these poor ignorant hillmen away from here and makes them fight colonial wars for the benefit of a clique of plutocrats abroad’ (100-01). She is critical too of missionary efforts: ‘You’ll take away their old gods, merely replacing them with a new one, instead of teaching them to be *really* independent minded’ (100).<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, the two Asian characters are keen to foster cross-cultural connections. Member of the Rana family, General Kumar is a courteous elderly gentleman, at ease in both East and West – ‘He wore jodhpurs and a Nepalese tunic, on the old Chinese pattern, and a western style hunting jacket of Harris tweed on top’ (71) – even as he is only partially reconciled with the new political order: ‘We are, alas, a damn-ocracy now, madam, so fools have their way, and we Ranas have no power’ (74). Notwithstanding his friendships with Westerners and his belief in progress – he has gifted part of his property for the establishment of Fred’s hospital – the General is defensive of his country’s traditions – ‘Our maidens and our mountains are young and active; and twelve is not too soon for marriage in our land’ (73).<sup>37</sup> He also disapproves of a group of young communists, who ‘make empty promises to fill hungry stomachs’ (385).

While the General goes out of his way to help his Western friends, securing passes for the wedding ceremonies, providing Anne with a jeep and counselling Fred on his marriage problems, the Field Marshall is Han’s chief ‘translator’ of Eastern thinking. Philosopher and collector of ‘Nepalese and Tibetan manuscripts, [his] French and German and English first editions’ (125), he is described as an astute observer of people, who knows ‘the desires and thoughts of the people of the Valley’ (125), as well as its many political intrigues. Throughout the novel, the Field Marshall endeavours to explain Eastern thinking and points out the shortcomings of Western thought patterns, whilst at the same time

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<sup>36</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>37</sup> For example, King Mahendra’s parents were thirteen when he was born (Douglas, p. 512).

displaying a deep concern for the wellbeing of his Western friends. He introduces Anne to the Bhagavad-Gita to help her overcome her writer's block and understand her own restlessness, and counsels her to 'never be attached to success or failure in your actions. In other words, remain detached from the fruit of action. That is the secret of the Lord Krishna, the Lord of Life. That is living' (158).

But Han departs from the middlebrow's sentimental mode, when her third-person narrator gently mocks these sympathetic characters. Eudora worries about sanitation at the hotel and is hoodwinked into a visit to a senile Swami; Fred plots myriad escapes from Eudora, assisted by a mischievous General, who is usually shown with a glass of whisky in his hand and a glass of milk on the side. In this use of irony to highlight unspoken tensions and contradictions in the dominant discourse of an era – here the twin Cold War discourses of containment and integration – Han draws on the comic tradition of female writing and creates the double-voicedness encountered too in the novels by Leslie and McMinnies.

Han's irony is sharper though when introducing several Western characters, who are described as imperialist, racist and driven mostly by their dislike of communism. Much like *The Ugly American's* 'ugly' characters, they vividly illustrate the need for greater cross-cultural understanding.<sup>38</sup> The American artist Pat – 'She looks as if she needed a good bath' (109) – believes that the establishment of a club – 'A good club, I mean, select you know, keep out anybody who's undesirable. [...] A real good cosmopolitan, democratic-minded club' (151) – will support her and her compatriot Enoch P. Bowers's ambitions to 'building up democracy' in Nepal (151). Meanwhile the American journalist Blumenfeld – 'the non-pareil Blumenfeld, who appeared dragging a Buddhist priest with him' (399) – plans to come back to Nepal and 'put some order in the religion' (400).

More harmful to the local community are the attitudes of John Ford (Anne's husband) and Isobel Maupratt. The former is portrayed as the stereotypical, racist ex-colonial, unable to imagine a world that is not organised along the lines of British imperial institutions:

'By Jove!' exclaimed John, moved to the depths of his self by the sight of a soldier smoking on duty, 'that thing wouldn't have gone down at all well with Old Pickle (our last Governor, before we gave self-rule to the natives and they went and made a mess of things).' (85)

Isobel is an equally stereotypical spinster, daughter of British missionaries in Shanghai and now the head of an educational establishment for Nepali girls. Described as a 'statuesque, brusque Boadicea' (49), 'breasting forward in sprightly warrioress fashion' (55), Isobel fervently believes in the superiority of Western religion and morality: 'We merely show, by example, what a higher and nobler ideal it is than those revolting idols and all that preposterous throwing of flowers about. [...] They're immoral. Sunk in Godless impurity' (370).

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<sup>38</sup> Klein, pp. 88-89.

Again, Han's irony is at work as she exposes the prejudices of these unsympathetic characters. John is convinced the new club will become the 'fountain of western culture' (154), creating a 'magic bond that will cement the freedom-loving peoples of Nepal together with the other freedom-loving peoples of the world. [...] It would combat communism' (154). Isobel is in permanent consternation at the sight of Nepali erotic art: 'those frightful carvings and paintings everywhere, [...] Horrid, horrid things. One tried hard *never* to look at them' (36).<sup>39</sup> Isobel and John are united too in their disregard for the Nepali way of life – 'Everything in a mess, nothing gets done' (88) – their condemnation of Anne and Unni's inter-racial romance as 'spiritual degeneracy' (482) and their own sense of religious superiority. Both characters recede into the background in the later chapters of the book with Isobel's tragic descent into madness. In a final ironic gesture, the narrator shows a drunk and blaspheming Isobel, caught up in a procession of Nepali women and being shuffled past the statues and carvings of Nepal's deities she had previously denounced (489-93).

Tourism and tourists are part of the varied background stories in *The Mountain Is Young* and further contribute to the novel's discussion of Cold War cultural politics, while tapping into the growing middle-class interest in travel and travel fiction.<sup>40</sup> Specifically, Han challenges Klein's portrayal of the American tourist as curious and open-minded, and devoid of any racist or imperialist thoughts.<sup>41</sup> Instead, the Americans in her novel are shown to be mostly interested in adding to their tally of safaris, albeit at knockdown prices: 'These people seem to think that we damfool Americans pay *any* price' (149).<sup>42</sup> Their superficial commentary on local politics – 'it's a good thing to have aristocrats running a country. Otherwise the Reds might take over' (149) – further reveals their inability to 'forge bonds with people around the world'.<sup>43</sup> As such, Han departs from the middlebrow's trope of travel as a space for meaningful cultural exchange.<sup>44</sup>

To conclude, in *The Mountain Is Young*, the reader encounters a diverse cast of characters, some embodying feelings of sympathy and a belief in greater cross-cultural understanding, others representing the fear of communism, which permeates post-war public opinion, mediated through an ironic narrator, who underlines the flaws of both sets of characters. While promoting the middlebrow's sentimentalist discourse of integration – what Tickell calls its discourse of affective cosmopolitanism – Han exposes the fragility of this commitment through her less sympathetic characters, who are also associated with the discourse of containment, as well as residual imperialist

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<sup>39</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>40</sup> In part, this interest in foreign travel writing is a continuation of the success of colonial adventure novels and romances, which according to Mary Louise Pratt endeavoured to give the reader 'at home' a sense of imperial order and their place in it. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (second edition), (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Klein, p. 103; p. 109.

<sup>42</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.



thinking.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the third-person narrator plays a highly ambivalent role in the novel's cultural politics, alternating between sympathy and irony, and calling into question the Western ability to 'know' the East. This ambivalence arguably weakens the potential for 'imaginative communion' which according to Klein lends the middlebrow its didactic role, and which encourages its readers to learn about the world around them by 'emotionally entering into a universe somehow foreign to their own' and at the same time 'feel intensely about other people.'<sup>46</sup> In the next section, I ask how British reviewers responded to these themes.

### Readers and the Cold War middlebrow

Jonathan Cape, Han's British publisher, advertised *The Mountain Is Young* as "the lovely and moving book" which she wrote out of her experience in "The Land of the Gods" – Nepal, at the time of the coronation. In it she combines wit and humour with rare tolerance.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the blurb to the British first edition praised the novel's documentary quality, pointing to Han's 'rich experience' and confirming her status as native informant: 'She reveals with flawless authenticity the Nepal of today, an essentially eleventh-century society already touched by modern "progress", gradually being invaded by the tourists, and striving to leap into the twentieth century.' Cape also underlined the romance at the heart of the novel and made explicit the connection with her earlier bestseller: 'an enchanting love story told with all the fervour which made *A Many-Splendoured Thing* such an unforgettable book.'

Contemporary reviews in the British press indicate that Han's effort to write a documentary novel and romance was not universally appreciated. Some reviewers commented positively on Han's powers of description. The *Guardian* characterised the novel as 'an eloquent travelogue,' while the *Observer* highlighted its multinational cast of characters, adding that 'the feel and look of Nepal are very well conveyed.'<sup>48</sup> The *Sunday Times* wrote approvingly that 'the contrast between the Nepalese and the precisely defined European colony is skilfully achieved.'<sup>49</sup> Others underplayed its documentary merits. The *Spectator* was concerned that the novel's documentary qualities – 'jolly good documentary it is – fluid, pungent and vividly observed' – mask its literary weaknesses: 'Han Suyin has gone beyond the legitimate expedient of using Nepal as an exciting background; she has used it as an alternative to the story and as an excuse for losing her grip.'<sup>50</sup> The *New Statesman* described the novel as a 'sexologue – i.e., a travelogue about Nepal plus a love story,' but discounted its political undertones: 'It is what one calls documentary fiction, but of an ingeniously non-political

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<sup>45</sup> Tickell, 'Cold War Fictions', p. 246.

<sup>46</sup> Klein, p. 65.

<sup>47</sup> *The Times*, 31 July 1958, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Patricia Hodgart, 'Storm in a Rock-pool', *Manchester Guardian*, 27 May 1958, p. 2; Angus Wilson, 'A School for Scandal', *Observer*, 25 May 1958, p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Hilary Seton, 'Going Back', *Sunday Times*, 22 June 1958, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Simon Raven, 'Vae Fictis', *Spectator*, 30 May 1958, p. 710.

kind: you shut the guide-book and jump into bed.’<sup>51</sup> This reviewer believed that her descriptive writing was ‘more than competent’ and her depiction of Nepal ‘as thorough and readable as most of us are likely to require,’ thus setting a relatively low bar for the didactic achievements of the novel.<sup>52</sup> But he further regretted that her ‘characterisation, especially of her Europeans, is not strong enough. The only people who begin to come alive are some of her minor Asian comics like the Nepalese general.’<sup>53</sup>

The critics were not impressed either with the romantic plot. The *TLS* remarked that:

Miss Han bridges more of a gap in her picture of love than her sophisticated Western style would suggest; in all her novels she is concerned to give sexual love its Eastern due, to convey the restrained and selfless ecstasy beyond passion, where body and soul are supposed to reign jointly, and she is perhaps too little aware that cynicism rightly steps in to scoff after too much of the pseudo-Platonism.<sup>54</sup>

*The Times* made a similar point, writing that the narrative ‘is weighed down with sex as with a heavily jewelled cloak [...] there are moments it resembles the work of some sublimated, sophisticated, supercharged Ethel M. Dell.’<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile the *Guardian* complained that ‘Han Suyin finds it hard to control her over-abundant material and occasionally turns aside disconcertingly into wild melodrama.’<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, some modern middlebrow critics believe that melodrama makes its appearance in the middlebrow (for example, through the use of stock characters animated by intense emotions and through strong moral resolution) alongside more realistic description and dialogue.<sup>57</sup> Lassner argues that it can be used to narrate a political crisis.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, contemporary reviewers of Han’s novel appear to use the term in a more dismissive manner, divorced from its political connotation.

A common complaint is that Han has caricatured the protagonists of her central love story to such an extent that, as noted by Angus Wilson, ‘it becomes difficult to maintain sympathy with so censorious a life urge.’<sup>59</sup> Wilson further opined: ‘Unfortunately Miss Han Suyin is lyrical about sex in a D.H. Lawrence way without Lawrence’s mental toughness to keep her rhapsodies under control.’<sup>60</sup> In a comment reminiscent of the early twentieth-century ‘battle of brows,’ he characterised *The Mountain Is Young* as a ‘naïve, middlebrow version of Lawrence.’<sup>61</sup> ‘It is all rather a pity,’ he

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<sup>51</sup> Maurice Richardson, ‘New Novels’, *New Statesman*, 7 June 1958, p. 741.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Marigold Johnson, ‘Women in Love’, *TLS*, 13 June 1958, p. 325.

<sup>55</sup> [Anon.], ‘New Fiction’, *The Times*, 29 May 1958, p. 13. Dell (1881-1939) was a popular romance writer.

<sup>56</sup> Hodgart, 27 May 1958, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Diana Holmes, ‘Mapping Modernity: The Feminine Middlebrow and the Belle Epoque’, *French Cultural Studies*, 25:3/4 (2014), 262-70 (pp. 263-65); Phylliss Lassner, ‘Testing the Limits of the Middlebrow: The Holocaust for the Masses’, *Modernist Cultures*, 6:1 (2011), 178-95 (p. 181).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179; p. 183.

<sup>59</sup> Wilson, 25 May 1958, p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

concluded, ‘because Miss Han Suyin has considerable powers of description and narration and humour, too, when sex doesn’t raise its noble head.’<sup>62</sup> Likewise, the *Books and Bookmen* reviewer declared that ‘the hackles were soon rising,’ as he confronted Han’s ‘ cliché characterisation, the celluloid emotion and the incredible dialogue.’<sup>63</sup> In a further illustration of the fluid boundaries between the middlebrow and more popular forms of fiction, this reviewer concluded: ‘One might have felt inclined to dismiss it more benignly as acceptable women’s magazine fiction, inventive and lively, had it not been for the vulgarity of the sexual episodes and a note of shrill pretentiousness.’<sup>64</sup>

The British reviewers were not taken either with its ‘East meets West’ theme. While *The Times* recognised that she had managed to avoid the ‘ clichés of tourism,’ the *TLS* dismissed Han’s detailed descriptions of Nepal’s festivals:<sup>65</sup>

Because her theme involves a flamboyant pageant, of the Nepalese coronation, fights with the kukri, temples, mountains and feasts, Miss Han can afford to caricature her kill-joy Westerners and enjoy the pagans who turn decorum inside out. But, as always, Miss Han is rather too wordily ambitious, and it is a great pity that her love story is amplified with much pretentious mysticism.<sup>66</sup>

The *TLS* further observed that the novel ‘starts with the advantage of a setting romantic enough to dispel cynicism – the valley of Khatmandu,’ where ‘Anne, frigid and devitalized from settler life with her boorish husband, thaws magically in the glow of a people whose life revolves around the beauty of the human body.’<sup>67</sup> However, neither the *TLS*, nor the other reviewers appeared interested in the inter-ethnic romance between Anne and Unni, suggesting that its discourse of affective cosmopolitanism would likely not resonate with some British readers.

Reflecting on the reception of her novel, Han later remarked that she had written *The Mountain Is Young* ‘with irony and laughter, [...] literature, after all, should not be all heaving and smoulder and wrung-out soul,’ adding:<sup>68</sup>

The world of literature then was not attuned to that mixture of mockery and malice, tinsel and gold, drabness and glory, poetry and banality; and yet that was what Nepal, what India were like: tragedy is farce and the ingredients of drama the commonest in laughter.<sup>69</sup>

Nevertheless, in her novel Han implicitly endorses the didactic role ascribed to the middlebrow, when in a brief authorial intervention, she comments: ‘In Asia, young, didactic, idealistic, the social novel must also be the political novel, the writer the fighter; talent merely used in the service of art, art for art’s sake, is considered outrageous, selfish and wrong’ (263).<sup>70</sup> She further hints at the challenges

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Anthony Bloomfield, ‘New Fiction’, *Books and Bookmen*, July 1958, p. 23.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> *The Times*, 29 May 1958, p. 13.

<sup>66</sup> Johnson, 13 June 1958, p. 325.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Han, *My House*, p. 216.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> In later writings, Han spoke of the responsibility of Afro-Asian writers in ‘promoting understanding and progress for humanity as well as for fighting against oppression, exploitation, ignorance, and superstitions of all

faced by the postcolonial author, when vocalising the hesitations of the Indian poet Sharma, who despite holding distinct views on Asia's route to modernity, 'shrinks from the courage (or the cowardice) necessary to give shape in selfish solitude, away from the vile realities of economics and demography, to the graceful fantasies which visit his heart' (263).

To conclude, for the British critics, *The Mountain Is Young's* mimetic qualities were insufficient to make up for the flaws they perceived in the main romantic relationship. They also detected elements of melodrama, customarily associated with popular fiction, even as they appreciated Han's humanity in depicting her fictional characters. Despite its overtly political discourse, reviewers read the novel primarily as a romantic tale, of interest for its personal relationships and its exotic setting, recalling commentaries on Huxley's *Mau Mau* novel. Furthermore, no mention is made of Han's engagement with the complexities of Cold War politics. Equally overlooked are its discussion of development, foreign aid and the environment, which will be considered in the next two sections.

### **The fallacy of foreign aid: Han Suyin and the discourse of development**

In a 1963 article in the Hong Kong political magazine *Eastern Horizon*, Han discussed the unequal economic relationship between Asia and the West, which in her view was a direct consequence of imperialism. Han was a regular contributor to *Eastern Horizon*, frequently praising Mao's leadership and the achievements of the Cultural Revolution, whilst denouncing the persistent inequality of neocolonial relationships.<sup>71</sup> Here, her focus is on the unequal terms of trade between former colonial countries and the industrialised West; the continued ownership of productive resources by Western interests; and the increasing wealth gap between East and West.<sup>72</sup> Han was highly critical too of foreign aid, which she characterised as a new kind of economic exploitation, invariably benefiting Western businesses.<sup>73</sup> This results in what she calls a 'fallacy of aid,' namely, 'giving with one hand and taking away with the other, and *taking away much more than is given,*' thus countering the American rhetoric that aid to the 'free peoples of the world' would contribute to 'prosperity and peace [...] personal freedom and happiness for all mankind.'<sup>74</sup> To the contrary, in Han's view, aid amounts to:

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kinds.' Quoted in Ina Zhang, 'A Dissenting Voice: The politics of Han Suyin's Literary Activities in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Malaya and Singapore', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 57:2 (2021), 155 -70 (p. 159).

<sup>71</sup> Alex Tickell and Anne Wetherilt, 'Non-Alignment and Maoist China: *Eastern Horizon* in the Era of Decolonisation, 1960–1981', in *Edinburgh Companion to British Colonial Periodicals*, ed. by David Finkelstein and David Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>72</sup> Han Suyin, 'Relations Between East and West', *Eastern Horizon*, 2:11 (September 1963), pp. 9-15 (pp. 10-11).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13. Italics in original. Harry S. Truman, *Inaugural Address*, 20 January 1949 <[https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/truman.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/truman.asp)>.

interference, political manipulation, and outright business investment [...] another form of exploitation, a new kind of colonialism, and it breeds communism more quickly, more efficiently and more surely than any kind of propaganda from Moscow or Peking could ever do.<sup>75</sup>

Mirroring the position taken up at Bandung – its Final Communiqué expressed a ‘general desire for economic co-operation among the participating countries on the basis of mutual interest and respect for national sovereignty’ – she asked: ‘We are grateful that you should think of helping us. *But we want to know what exactly you mean by help.*’<sup>76</sup>

Han’s description of Western aid as another form of exploitation and her insistence on ‘relations of equality, dignity and respect’ mark her participation in a broader conversation on the unequal relationship between former coloniser and colonised.<sup>77</sup> Echoing the denunciation of Western investments as acts of neocolonialism by earlier critics – Fanon writes of ‘the curse of independence,’ while Kwame Nkrumah terms aid ‘a revolving credit’ – she calls out the economic dependency of many Asian countries:<sup>78</sup>

Too many of the resources, of the sources of production, are still in hands other than those of the people themselves. A foreign power still has a stranglehold on the economy, and the benefits of whatever industrialization there is either flow out of the country in profits to foreign companies, or even if part return to the country whence they are derived, they are ill-used or wasted by incompetent or corrupt politicians.<sup>79</sup>

More generally, Han’s article – and as we shall see next, her novel – is engaging with a new post-war discourse which problematised poverty and constructed former colonies as ‘underdeveloped.’ Development discourse in the 1950s and 1960s was built on the notion of ‘lack’ and a belief that former colonies should follow the Western example and embrace agricultural modernisation and large-scale industrialisation, supported by state planning and foreign private capital.<sup>80</sup> Investments would ‘trickle down’ and lead to greater prosperity, promote democratic institutions and facilitate a fairer distribution of income. The American economist Walt Rostow was a key proponent of this so-called modernisation view and popularised the notion of ‘take-off’ as a critical stage in a country’s

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<sup>75</sup> Han, ‘Relations’, p. 13.

<sup>76</sup> Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference of Bandung, 24 April 1955, para A.1 <[https://www.evce.eu/obj/final\\_communique\\_of\\_the\\_asian\\_african\\_conference\\_of\\_bandung\\_24\\_april\\_1955-en-676237bd-72f7-471f-949a-88b6ae513585.html](https://www.evce.eu/obj/final_communique_of_the_asian_african_conference_of_bandung_24_april_1955-en-676237bd-72f7-471f-949a-88b6ae513585.html)>. Han, ‘Relations’, p. 12. Italics in original. Earlier, Fanon wrote of aid: ‘we do not tremble with gratitude’ (p. 81).

<sup>77</sup> Han, ‘Relations’, p. 15.

<sup>78</sup> Fanon, p. 77; Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Panaf Books, 1974) [1965], p. xv. Although usually associated with Nkrumah, the term ‘neocolonialism’ was first used in 1956 by Jean-Paul Sartre in his critique of French politics in Algeria. Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Colonialism Is a System’, in *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. by Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer and Terry McWilliams (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 36-55.

<sup>79</sup> Han, ‘Relations’, p. 11.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24; Colin Leys, *The Rise & Fall of Development Theory* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996), p. 8; McEwan, pp. 115-25.

progression to modernity.<sup>81</sup> Equally influential was the St. Lucian economist W. Arthur Lewis, who described industrialisation as the main mechanism for transitioning from a traditional to a modern society.<sup>82</sup>

Arturo Escobar describes development as a historically produced discourse, mediated through Western thinking, and not unlike Said's conceptualisation of Orientalist discourse.<sup>83</sup> Development studies of the 1950s and 1960s provided the theoretical underpinning for Western foreign aid programmes aimed at promoting growth and stemming the spread of communism in the decolonising world.<sup>84</sup> They implied a commitment to a single, linear trajectory with industrialisation as its end goal, and routinely ignored the diverse histories and cultures of developing nations.<sup>85</sup> They further assumed that national governments and international organisations could impose their abstract models on local communities.<sup>86</sup> In practice though, while many developing countries experienced high growth rates in the 1960s, employment and wages did not rise as predicted, leading in many cases to greater income inequality and increased poverty.<sup>87</sup>

Partly in reaction to the disappointing outcomes of early development programmes, 'dependency theories' emphasised the growing dependence of poorer countries on international capital, the stripping of resources and exploitative labour practices, whilst pointing to the long history of imperialism.<sup>88</sup> In this view, also espoused by Marxist economists, 'underdevelopment' was the result of capitalist accumulation and the demands of global markets, rather than an intrinsic condition of 'backwardness.'<sup>89</sup> Often used interchangeably, dependency and underdevelopment theories ascribed the divergent trajectories of Western and Third World economies to the dominance of foreign capital and the export of surplus profits to the metropolis; to skewed income distributions which do not support deep domestic markets; and to the failure to create skilled local labour forces.<sup>90</sup> The resulting pattern of uneven development – the co-existence of development and

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<sup>81</sup> W.W. Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth* (1952) and *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960).

<sup>82</sup> W. Arthur Lewis, *The Theory of Economic Growth* (1955).

<sup>83</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 5-6.

<sup>84</sup> McEwan, pp. 121-23; David Williams, 'The History of International Development Aid', in *Handbook of Global Economic Governance: Players, Power and Paradigms*, ed. by Manuela Moschella and Catherine Weaver (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 233-48.

<sup>85</sup> McEwan, p. 123.

<sup>86</sup> Escobar, *Encountering*, p. 44; McEwan, p. 119. On the tensions between modernisation theories and community-led development, see Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>87</sup> For example, Deepak Nayyar, *Catch Up: Developing Countries in the World Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 116-17; p. 124; p. 155; p. 161.

<sup>88</sup> Leys, *Rise & Fall*, pp. 11-12; McEwan, p. 125-26. Influential texts are: Paul A. Baran, *The Political Economy of Growth* (1957); Andre Gunder Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution* (1969); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) and Samir Amin, *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* (1976).

<sup>89</sup> Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (third edition), (London and New York: Verso, 2010), pp. 196- 202.

<sup>90</sup> For an extensive critique of underdevelopment and dependency theories, see Leys, *Rise & Fall*, passim.

underdevelopment that Marxists believe is a fundamental characteristic of modern capitalism – was seen as a key attribute of neocolonial systems, with local elites mobilising available resources for their own interest and disenfranchised classes feeling powerless to halt the extraction of resources by Western corporations.<sup>91</sup>

Similar themes feature in *The Mountain Is Young* as Han uses her protagonists to engage with two key issues: aid as a key to prosperity and as a tool to serve geopolitical interests. Starting with the former, it is Unni, the engineer in charge of building the dam, who acts as spokesman in favour of development: ‘It’s strenuous and sometimes dangerous work. But it’s going to make so much difference to the people in a few years. Hydro-electric power, good roads, better crops, no floods’ (119). At the same time, he does not ignore the underlying geopolitical motives. Commenting on a new road that is being built as part of the ‘Indian Aid to Nepal programme’ (119), Unni explains:

‘Everybody is so keen and eager to help Nepal...The Americans have a special Point Four Aid Mission here, to build hospitals and schools, establish handicrafts, bee-keeping, sawmills, anything to get the people out of their poverty. They also plan to build a road and develop some valleys. Possibly the Chinese later may also offer to do things for Nepal. Nepal is like a woman with many suitors now, only too eager to please her with gifts.’

‘The cold war.’

‘Yes. Fear makes us generous. The cold war, pursued in Khatmandu as in every other capital of the world. (120)<sup>92</sup>

In a further illustration of how development serves Western interests, Unni asserts: ‘Nepal is a backward underdeveloped country, and all underdeveloped areas are potential exploitation for communism; and so the idea is to plunge in and do something before the other side does it’ (120). Prompted by Anne’s questioning, he acknowledges the shortcomings of American aid and the vast institutional apparatus supporting the project:

‘Does it work?’

‘Not always. For various reasons, chiefly because Aid, as it is called, is often not suited in style and scope to the country for which it is aimed. Our friends the Americans are the worst offenders in that respect: they build a marvellously equipped hospital, and then leave it to fend for itself, and of course, it goes to bits in no time; they draw up a programme for building a road which will cost millions, and send so many experts and tons of machinery, yet they fail to import also the ordinary, run-of-the-mill technician to keep the machinery in good order, and it’ll rot. [...] They vote millions of dollars in Aid to foreign countries, but more than two-thirds of it goes in paying the enormous salaries and in building amenities for their own staffs – then they are surprised that the countries they help are not a bit grateful.’ (120)

The anti-American rhetoric is reprised later by Vassili, the Royal Hotel manager: ‘Americans can’t think of Aid without automatically thinking of it in terms of anti-communist money, anti-Chinese money, and so everybody suspects that they don’t really aid, they have military motives in mind’

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<sup>91</sup> Smith, *Uneven Development*, p. 6; Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), pp. 10-11.

<sup>92</sup> America’s Point Four Program was launched by President Truman in 1949 to provide technical assistance to ‘underdeveloped’ nations (Escobar, *Encountering*, p. 36).

(262). It is picked up too by local anti-Western newspapers, who accuse ‘self-styled friends of Nepal’ (427) of imperialism in a new guise: ‘Under pretences of Aid they spy, they take photographs, they blast our mountains, kill our people, they treat Nepal as a conquered land’ (427).

The American presence features too in discussions between Unni, Colonel Jaganathan, in charge of India Army engineers working on the road, and the American Jesuit Father MacCullough. This time the focus is on the use of indigenous labour, who have caused ‘trouble’ (184). According to Father MacCullough, these troubles amount to political agitation:

They tried to rouse anti-Indian and anti-American feeling, in all sorts of ways. They said all these projects were for killing the Nepalese men, and taking the women away to India. They said they didn’t want a road, or dams, or schools, or anything, as it meant that we wanted to occupy Nepal. They said all this Aid is really to annex the country and turn it into an American airbase or an Indian colony. (184)

Father MacCullough recognises, however, the detrimental impact of foreign aid on the local economy, explaining that Nepalese farmers are not being compensated for the loss of land, whilst imported Indian labourers are receiving higher wages than the Nepalese (307). Meanwhile Unni recalls local resistance – ‘They said we intended to cut all the water off, and starve them’ (184) – but concedes: ‘They’ve got a perfect right to resent being helped’ (184). And Colonel Jaganathan recalls ethnic tensions: ‘At first the labourers were frightened of working for us. [...] They called us Kaffirs. They said we were black and ate human flesh, like the goddess Kala Durga’ (184). Of note is that the debate is held between Westerners and the Asian elite, whilst the workers themselves are silent, their resistance conveyed through ‘First Worlders and middle-class Third Worlders.’<sup>93</sup>

Whereas these debates consider development through a Western lens, prioritising geopolitical and economic motives, Han provides an alternative view, grounded in Eastern thinking and giving agency to Asians themselves. The poet Sharma asserts that Asians ‘must now go through the Machine Age, and the Industrial Revolution, as Europe has done’ (465), adding that superstition and lack of education hold back Nepal:

We are importing food from India, even into this valley, one of the most fertile in the world. I put my faith in the dam, in the factories, not in the gods or the virtues of man. [...] What we need are picks and shovels, bulldozers and syringes, to remove the high cliffs of poverty and injustice and pestilence. (467)

But the Nepalese Field Marshall does not fully subscribe to this Western model of development, predicting that ‘[t]he Industrial Revolution will inevitably bring spiritual changes in its wake’ (466), even though he admits that there is hunger in the valleys, which is likely to lead to unrest: ‘starving men have little reason’ (466).

The problem of hunger in Asia is a frequent theme in Han’s non-fiction. Today’s Asians, she wrote in August 1960, want ‘freedom from Want’ (one of the four freedoms) and ‘no longer believe

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<sup>93</sup> Huggan and Tiffin, p. 51.



that this freedom will be a gift of the gods, they *know* it will be a freedom *made by man*.<sup>94</sup> Asia now wants its own Industrial Revolution and speed is '[t]he most important single factor.'<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, while Han wholeheartedly supported the need for accelerated development through education, adoption of Western technology and industrialisation, she cautioned that future prosperity would depend on 'the work done today, the development of national resources by the people themselves, by their own efforts.'<sup>96</sup> The belief in 'man's right and his ability to master his environment is strong in Asia today,' she claimed.<sup>97</sup> Her fictional Asian characters too promote an Asian-centred approach to development, driven by local efforts and focused on broader societal change, in turn echoing Fanon's call for Third World countries to find their own answer and 'go forward [...] in the company of Man, in the company of all men.'<sup>98</sup>

In *The Mountain Is Young*, Han exposes the contradictions inherent in the post-war discourse of development, while making the case for greater equity in multilateral relationships. As seen earlier in this chapter, much of the dialogic nature of her novel stems from the debates between its numerous (primary and secondary) characters. As such, Han draws on the middlebrow's interest in character to address the economic and social inequalities of the postcolonial world, which had also featured prominently on the Bandung agenda. As I discuss next, Han expands on the strains produced by Western development initiatives through her descriptions of the Himalayan landscape.

### **Development and the environment in *The Mountain Is Young***

When Han's fictional protagonists discuss the construction of the dam and the new road, they are not only aware of its political significance, but also of the formidable challenges to Western science and technology presented by the mountains:

She keeps moving about. A week ago she suddenly gave a big scream, and split off a chunk down the left slope, and tumbled a good bit of embankment and some of the road a few thousand feet down. Nearly took a dozen workers, [...] She is going to play up again during this year's monsoon. (112)

The folds round which the road ran, in and out, had something fluid about their outlines, their thrust and fall was unpredictable [...] A stronger blast might dispose them otherwise, and then the puny road would veer, displace, and disappear. (180)

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<sup>94</sup> Han Suyin, 'Social Changes in Asia', *Eastern Horizon* I: 2 (August 1960), pp. 12-18 (p. 12). Italics in original. The four freedoms feature in President Roosevelt's January 1941 speech:

<<https://www.fdrlibrary.org/four-freedoms>>. Similarly, Arthur Lewis wrote: 'The case for economic growth is that it gives man greater control over his environment, and thereby increases his freedom' (*The Theory of Economic Growth*, p. 421).

<sup>95</sup> Han, 'Social Changes', p. 12; p. 17.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>98</sup> Fanon, p. 254. Similarly, Nkrumah writes: 'This positive action is within the power of the peoples [...] but it is only within their power if they act at once, with resolution and in unity' (p. 259).

In a direct rebuttal of Western confidence in technology, American investment is shown to be wasteful and ineffective – ‘the American road is at the bottom of the river right now’ (183) – while ‘[t]he modern bulldozers which the Americans had brought lay half buried in mud washed up from the flooding streams’ (411). And there is no guarantee that Western building efforts will prove permanent:

It was funny, looking at this thin strand, a decision of man, a decision hung in mid-hill between summit and base, surrounded by a world of ravaged rock. It was like a knifecut in butter, round which this rolling, indecisive, unsolid land wavered and crumbled, ready to let fall a cliffside upon them at any moment. (180)

To a large extent, Han’s criticism is conveyed through natural imagery, principally the Himalayan mountains. Customarily featuring as the site of high adventure or exotic romance – Kipling’s *Kim* and Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* come to mind – for Western travellers and writers, the mountain range symbolised the triumph of individual endeavour, proof of Western superiority.<sup>99</sup> In the wake of the conquest of Everest, accounts of climbing expeditions gained in popularity amongst Western readers, their fictional and non-fictional protagonists continuing in the footsteps of Victorian soldiers-adventurers.<sup>100</sup> In *The Mountain Is Young*, Han mockingly describes these modern heroes, talking loudly of ‘arêtes and glaciers, of crampons and cwms’ (214), with the Swiss, ‘prosaic ever, stolid even in triumph’ reported to have come down from the summit ‘in a blaze of reporters and photographers, and the immortal words they found to say were: “Oh, it was quite high”’ (214). A different sensitivity, is conveyed through Fred, a keen climber himself, but hesitant to go to the mountain summits: ‘it seemed to him a sacrilege. And though he knew of the expeditions to conquer this or that mountain, and spoke to the climbers, [...] he felt sometimes like begging forgiveness for their manlike desecration’ (55). Fred’s awareness of the Western need to ‘dominate and to reign over all Creation, and certainly over the last strongholds of the gods, the accessible Himalayas’ (55) speaks to Han’s preoccupation with the impact of Western tourism.<sup>101</sup>

More generally, Han engages the imagery of mountain and river in her critique of the environmental costs of Western development projects:

This was the work of man, disruptive, mapped in this wider gap hollowed by him between the ridges, almost a plain, but narrowing again where some meaningless objects like columns with trenches round them, the dam’s beginning, obtruded against the horizon and athwart the tumultuous downfall of green milk waters. Beyond this chaos of activity the next valley could be seen, soon to become a lake, a reservoir of waters held in, already lakewise spreading. (541)

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<sup>99</sup> Miller, p. 91.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Fred’s character also challenges the discourse of imperial masculinity, celebrated in imperial adventure fiction and recalled nostalgically in Hunt’s *The Ascent of Everest* (1953). See also Peter L. Bayers, *Imperial Ascent: Mountaineering, Masculinity, and Empire* (Boulder, University Press of Colorado, 2003), p. 12.

But Han also makes the case *for* development, as she describes the annual flooding damage caused by the untamed river and the hardship suffered by Nepal's rural poor:

Every year it was the same. Like a pendulum the river went swinging its ominous, beautiful arc between two ranges of hills eighty miles from each other. Seven times in the last ten years it had changed its course, going west, then going east. In Khatmandu the peasants from the flooded valley lay in the filth of the rain soaked streets and begged for food, and the ribs of the babies showed very clearly above their huge copper bellies. (412)

Thus endowing the trope with contradictory meanings, Han captures what Rob Nixon calls 'slow violence' or 'the violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space.'<sup>102</sup> Describing Western investment and its disproportionate impact on the poor, she juxtaposes the humanitarian cost of the natural disasters Western projects are to mitigate, and the long-term degradation of the natural environment that will follow.

Invoking the trope of the sacred mountain, she further uses the image to denote local resistance, as the Nepalese believe that the infrastructure works will incur the wrath of the mountain gods, and in particular of 'Mana Mani, the Wayward One' (112), who is 'beautiful and young and doesn't like being tamed' (112). Local resistance is attributed to poverty and illiteracy, with Fred observing: 'There's an awful lot of feudalism and ignorance about, and it's easy to try to prove that natural calamities like floods and bad harvests are due to our meddling' (436). But, popular fears of Mana Mani are exploited by the local ruler (the Rampoche), who resents a project which will result in reduced rents and taxation, and higher (fairer) wages (436). It also emerges that the Rampoche has used the goddess to stir unrest on the construction site:

The goddess is angry at the dam. [...] The goddess will not allow her mountains and rivers to be polluted by the dam. Already twice, there have been landslides and all the work washed away. Now the men will refuse to work, unless ...

[...]

Unless there is a human sacrifice. A man must die. (523)

Interestingly, it is Unni who symbolises this uneasy encounter between Western technology and Eastern traditions. As the engineer tasked with taming the mountain, he is the target of the Rampoche's ire and at risk of becoming the human sacrifice demanded by Mana Mani. A powerful image – Mana Mani is said to want a new husband, 'the blood and the seed of males' (518) – the mountain god represents the traditional beliefs American experts – and Unni working with them – are intent on eradicating. Seen in this light, the dam and the road represent both Western intrusion in 'the land of gods and goddesses' (518) and a violent collision with ancient customs: 'the goddesses are very wrathful. We shall have plague as well as floods and hunger, and it is all because of the dam' (518).

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<sup>102</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 2.

Han further complicates the trope by injecting an element of doubt into the confident male discourse of development through the female encounter with nature's savage beauty. Here she draws on the Western tradition of the sublime mountain landscape, which symbolised both the mystery of the inaccessible and fears of the limits of human endeavour. Notably, in imperial fiction, the sublime was associated with darkness and terror of the unknown, suggesting instability within its discourse.<sup>103</sup> For Anne, 'Unni's malevolent mountain. [...] the female, goddess, jealous and blackhearted, cunning and scheming to keep the mountains and the river to herself' (534) comes to represent a 'kinship between us, the mountain and I, for we had established a secret pact' (534). Hence, Han positions the Western woman in alliance with the mountain, while recasting her Indian lover in the image of the superior Western explorer. But in mocking his determination to conquer, she also contests the masculinist discourse of British imperial fiction, which as Denis Cosgrove and Veronica della Dora write, attributed masculine qualities to the high mountains, with the Western explorer compelled into an exploration of the self, as he confronted physical hardship, injury and possibly death.<sup>104</sup>

What a small, laughable thing the dam must look, with Mana Mani looming on the back of it, the dam, taking the river with her, blandly, under her haughty stare. Ants' work. Man's work. Ants, grovelling about, yet conquering in the end. (534)

Through her various protagonists and the multiplicity of meanings attributed to her natural imagery, Han paints a complex picture of the impact of Western development. In doing so, she expands on her earlier critique of foreign aid as an instrument of Cold War politics and Western economic imperialism, pointing to its humanitarian benefits, as well as its environmental costs. Importantly, Han succeeds in presenting the debate in Asian terms, casting the construction of the dam as a battle between a corrupt feudal ruler and a more enlightened Asian elite, even as she stops short of committing to what Anthony Carrigan calls 'a renewed vision of environmental agency.'<sup>105</sup> She also uses her imaginative talents to promote the 'environmentalism of the poor,' thus giving visibility to the prime, yet often invisible victims of environmental destruction.<sup>106</sup> A similar concern drives Markandaya's novel, as we shall see in Chapter 5.

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<sup>103</sup> Philip Dickinson, 'Itineraries of the Sublime in the Postcolonial Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Postcolonial Novel*, ed. by Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 152-65 (p. 153); Bayers, pp. 6-8.

<sup>104</sup> Denis Cosgrove and Veronica della Dora, 'Introduction: High Places', in *High Places: Cultural Geographies of Mountains, Ice and Science*, ed. by Denis Cosgrove and Veronica della Dora (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 1-16 (p. 11). Likewise, Bayers focuses on the heroic, masculine qualities embodied by Western mountaineers (pp. 3-6.)

<sup>105</sup> Carrigan, p. 86.

<sup>106</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, pp. 4-5. See also Ramchandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (London: Earthscan, 1997), pp. 4-5; pp. 16-17.

## Conclusion

Set within the carefully documented Nepalese context and presenting a multinational cast of characters, *The Mountain Is Young* offers an incisive critique of Cold War politics, covering the geopolitical and cultural dimensions of the period's global power struggle. As in Part I, my critical focus on the author's use of narrative voice has brought the political dimension of female middlebrow writing to the fore. Here, Han brings together the middlebrow's interest in character and the female novel's distinct use of irony to offer a multi-faceted commentary on the ideological conflict that shaped Cold War culture, both in Britain and America. Her semi-autobiographical novel also exhibits the middlebrow's attentiveness to mimetic detail, notably in its descriptions of Nepal's nascent tourist industry, thereby responding to a growing middle-class interest in exotic locations, seen too in the public response to the conquest of Everest.

Much like the novels discussed in Part I, *The Mountain Is Young* is a highly dialogic text, its numerous characters not only adding local colour, but also producing a Bakhtinian encounter between competing Cold War ideologies. Significantly, Han's novel challenges the Western discourse of development, presenting foreign aid as a geopolitical tool which perpetuates existing inequalities, topics she would revisit in her later journalism. Han's novel also manifests an awareness of the environmental impact of large Western investment projects, and as such anticipates late twentieth-century postcolonial ecocriticism. At the same time, she does not wholly reject the case for large infrastructure works, with her novel's dialogism injecting an element of ambivalence, which she does not fully resolve.

British reviewers largely ignored its ecological message and did not seem interested either in its critique of development and foreign aid. Whereas reviewers commented positively on the documentary quality of the novel, suggesting a distinct metropolitan interest in its description of the foreign locale, perceived weaknesses in its characterisation and its central romance plot were of greater concern. Reviewers (and readers) may also have approached the novel expecting an updated version of the bestselling *A Many-Splendoured Thing*. As seen too in relation to the Part I authors, even when exploring political debates within the familiar conventions of middlebrow fiction, readers and critics do not always respond positively to the middlebrow's political discourse.

## CHAPTER 5: DECOLONISATION, DEVELOPMENT AND THE ENVIRONMENT: KAMALA MARKANDAYA, *THE COFFER DAMS* (1969)

### Introduction

Visiting the construction of the Bhakra-Nangal dam in July 1954, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru likened the site to the ‘biggest temple and mosque and gurdwara [...] the place where man works for the good of mankind.’<sup>1</sup> These ‘temples of the new age’ were a landmark and ‘the symbol of a nation’s will to march forward with strength, determination and courage.’<sup>2</sup> Its waters would irrigate vast areas of land and electric power would be generated ‘to run thousands of factories and cottage industries which will provide work for the people and relieve unemployment.’<sup>3</sup> On a later occasion, Nehru spoke of the ‘disease of gigantism,’ denouncing not the large dam projects themselves, but ‘the social upsets connected with the enormous concentration of national energy, all the national upsets, upsets of the people moving out and their rehabilitation and many other things, associated with a big project.’<sup>4</sup> Reading Kamala Markandaya’s *The Coffe Dams* (1969), the present chapter continues the discussion of development and infrastructure building in the decolonising world and draws out relevant comparisons with *The Mountain Is Young*.<sup>5</sup>

*The Coffe Dams* narrates the construction of a giant dam in an unnamed river basin in southern India. Led by a British engineering firm with a global footprint and enjoying the support of the government in New Delhi, the project brings together British and Indian engineers and technicians. They are not quite united though in their common goal, as for the former it is to be the ‘Clinton Mackendrick Dam’ and for the latter ‘the Great Dam, the Bharat Dam (159).’ Tensions abound as the supporting coffer dams need to be finished before the monsoon rains arrive and strong disagreements arise between the chief engineer Howard Clinton, his associate Mackendrick and representatives of the Indian labour force on the need to press on with the timetable, regardless of the risk to human lives. When at the novel’s climax, monsoon rains threaten the local Adivasi (tribal) settlement, Clinton refuses to take the one action that might save the tribe, namely breaking the coffer dams. In a parallel plot, Clinton’s wife Helen takes an interest in the tribe’s customs, befriends their elderly chief and has a brief affair with the indigenous crane operator Bashiam. A tragic sequence of

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<sup>1</sup> *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches: Volume III: March 1953-August 1957* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1958), pp. 1-4 (p. 3) <<https://indianculture.gov.in/ebooks/jawaharlal-nehru-speeches-vol-iii-march-1953-august-1957>>. Speech given in Hindi on 8 July 1954. Nehru’s rhetoric downplayed regional resistance to Bhakra-Nangal. See also Daniel Haines, ‘Development, Citizenship, and the Bhakra–Nangal Dams in Postcolonial India, 1948–1952’, *The Historical Journal* 65: 4 (2022), 1124–44.

<sup>2</sup> *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Baldev Singh (ed.), *Jawaharlal Nehru on Science and Society: A Collection of His Writings and Speeches* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 1988), pp. 172-75 (p. 172) <<https://www.indianculture.gov.in/ebooks/jawaharlal-nehru-science-and-society-collection-his-writings-and-speeches>>. Speech given on 17 November 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Kamala Markandaya, *The Coffe Dams* (London: Hope Road Publishing, 2020) [1969]. All references will be to this edition and will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

events – an accident leading to the loss of local life, Clinton’s decision to use a damaged crane without proper testing, Bashiam volunteering to bring up the bodies of his own people and in doing so assuage his personal guilt – leads to the latter’s retirement with a severe back injury. As the rains – and the novel – end, the riverbanks have held firm, but construction will continue, forever changing local life and the natural environment.

Until recently, the scholarship on *The Coffey Dams* was relatively limited, reflecting both its mixed reception and the broader trajectory of Markandaya’s literary career.<sup>6</sup> But, in the past few years, the novel has been rediscovered by critics, and in 2020, the independent publishing house HopeRoad reissued *The Coffey Dams*.<sup>7</sup> In parallel, the emergence of ecofeminism as an area of academic focus has spurred renewed scholarly interest in Markandaya’s oeuvre, although primarily in her debut *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954).<sup>8</sup> Of interest here are two recent studies, which read *The Coffey Dams* as a critique of the infrastructure policies pursued by decolonising nations. Sangita Patil contests the ecofeminist claim that women are the primary victims of dam building, because of their close connection with and dependency on nature.<sup>9</sup> Patil’s main argument is that Markandaya departs from the male/female binary proposed by Western ecofeminism, as rural men and women alike share a commitment to nature and are victims of its destruction.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Pranav Jani focuses less on environmental matters, and more on Nehru’s economic policies.<sup>11</sup> Jani is interested in the presentation of the nation by elite women writers of the post-independence period, principally Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal (1927-) and Anita Desai (1937-). He equates the building of the dam with postcolonial violence and suggests that Markandaya’s text offers a critique of neocolonialism and capitalist modernity, as nationalist and capitalist interests come together in the construction of the dam.<sup>12</sup> Jani presents the dam as a symbol of nation-building and the excesses of postcolonial modernity, whereas Patil views the structure as a metaphor for man’s confidence in technology and his disregard for the environment. Although both scholars conduct their analysis through the novel’s main characters, they reach different conclusions. For Jani, the text gives expression to the difficult memories of empire, on the one hand, and the aggressive politics of the Nehruvian government, on the

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<sup>6</sup> Larson, pp. 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Emma Garman, ‘Feminize Your Canon: Kamala Markandaya’, *The Paris Review*, 6 November 2018 <<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/11/06/feminize-your-canon-kamala-markandaya/>>.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Gurpreet Kaur, ‘Postcolonial Ecofeminism, Women and Land in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*’, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2:21 (2012), 100-10; Dana C. Mount, ‘Bend Like the Grass: Ecofeminism in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*’, *Postcolonial Text* 6:3 (2011), 1-20 <<https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1189/1208>>; Sharae Deckard, ‘Land, Water, Waste: Environment and Ecology in South Asian Fiction’, in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 10: The Novel in South and South East Asia Since 1945*, ed. by Alex Tickell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 172-86 (pp. 173-76).

<sup>9</sup> Sangita Patil, *Ecofeminism and the Indian Novel* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101-03.

<sup>11</sup> Pranav Jani, *Decentering Rushdie: Cosmopolitanism and the Indian Novel in English* (Columbus Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2010), pp. 63-66.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-84.

other.<sup>13</sup> For Patil, the novel conveys the tensions between nature and technology, arising from India's commitment to modernisation.<sup>14</sup>

This chapter extends the existing scholarship, first, by reading *The Cofferdams* in relation to the discourse of development, and second, by investigating its middlebrow status. In the first instance, I ask how Markandaya uses the novel's dialogism to question the socio-economic benefits of dam building, revealing a shared interest with *The Mountain Is Young*.<sup>15</sup> My main objective is to demonstrate that Markandaya's elaborate descriptions of the construction works and their societal impact establish a powerful counter-narrative to Nehru's glorification of India's dams as temples of modernity. Her novel also interrogates the post-war optimistic belief in Western technology and accelerated industrialisation, whilst acknowledging the uneven development, resulting from the alliance between national governments and global corporations.

Building on my discussion of *The Mountain Is Young*, I next discuss the environmental impact of the building projects undertaken by the postcolonial state, focusing on Markandaya's use of voice and imagery. Of particular interest is her novel's depiction of the plight of the displaced villagers, who bear the cost of large-scale dam projects and are driven to the margins of the new nation.<sup>16</sup> Inspired by Nixon's discussion of more recent postcolonial writing, I suggest that they exemplify the 'developmental refugees,' the Adivasi communities, who are physically and imaginatively removed by large infrastructure projects, carried out under the banner of development.<sup>17</sup> I also address Nixon's question as to whether the postcolonial author can give visibility to 'unimagined communities.'<sup>18</sup>

Markandaya's case illustrates the pitfalls of using press reviews to make inferences about a novel's contemporary reception. *The Cofferdams* was not widely covered in the British press, with only a handful of reviewers commenting on its topical interest. Hence it is with some caution that I consult the reviews to gauge the response to the novel's political themes. Noting that by the late 1960s, Markandaya's work no longer enjoyed the commercial success of her earlier novels, the reviews may also provide an indication of evolving literary expectations.<sup>19</sup> I therefore ask whether they are a manifestation of a waning public interest in the history of empire, or whether, as Rosemary

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>14</sup> Patil, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> According to Markandaya's daughter Kim Oliver, her mother read Han's novels. See 'Interview', 22 August 2019 <<https://bookblast.com/blog/interview-kim-oliver-literary-executor-small-axes/>>. In a subsequent email exchange with this author, she added that *The Mountain Is Young* was amongst those novels.

<sup>16</sup> Jani, p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, pp. 150-51.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George, 'Where in the World Did Kamala Markandaya Go?', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 42:3 (2009), 400-09.



Marangoly George believes, Markandaya's themes, characters and political stances were out of step with prevailing literary trends.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, I examine how Markandaya's novel navigates the tensions and aspirations of expatriate societies. In the context of the decolonising world, post-war novels register the loss of the glamour of empire, as well as the end of a lifestyle, as seen in the discussion of Leslie's and McMinnies's work. My interest here is in Markandaya's use of the middlebrow tropes of domesticity to describe the small community of British engineers, technicians and their wives. The discussion will consider the novel's implied commentary on residual imperialist thinking, also seen in *The Flying Fox*, and its narratorial attitude towards foreign experts, echoing Han's treatment of Western visitors in *The Mountain Is Young*.

### **Dam building, decolonisation and development discourse**

In his 1954 speech, Nehru proudly declared Bhakra-Nangal a special place: 'where a small village stood, but which today is a name ringing in every corner of India and in some parts of the world too; because this is a great work, the mark of a great enterprise.'<sup>21</sup> Post-war dam construction continued a colonial tradition of irrigation works, started by the British in the mid-eighteenth century. Canal systems, together with roads, railway lines and bridges, led not only to large-scale transformation of the Indian countryside, but also to the loss of traditional water management skills, located in rural and Adivasi communities, and the creation of vulnerable flood environments.<sup>22</sup> After independence, large dam projects would amplify this colonial legacy, whilst also bringing in foreign contractors, engineers and World Bank experts.<sup>23</sup> Nixon observes that although the dams were meant to signify newly independent nations 'soaring towards development by mastering rivers and reaching for the sky' and concretising their 'modernity, prosperity, and autonomy,' in reality, they created new dependencies as they were financed by loans from the World Bank, Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, it is appropriate to consider dam building in relation to the wider issue of development.

Although dam building was an integral part of the post-war development discourse of 'catching up with the West,' in the decolonising world, it had the effect of aggravating tensions between political and industrial elites on the one hand, and local communities, the victims of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 402; p. 406. See also Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, 'The Novel of India', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 10: The Novel in South and South East Asia since 1945*, ed. by Alex Tickell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 3-43 (p. 14). Rajan believes that in her attempt to meet the expectations of her British and American publishers, she resorted to formulaic tropes, such as the stoically suffering Indian peasant or the liberal Englishman.

<sup>21</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru's *Speeches*, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Rohan D'Souza, 'Framing India's Hydraulic Crises: The Politics of the Modern Large Dam', *Monthly Review*, 2008, 112-24 (pp. 114-15); Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016), pp. 178-79; Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016), pp. 120-22.

<sup>23</sup> D'Souza, p. 115; pp. 120-21.

<sup>24</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, pp. 166-67.

displacement schemes, on the other hand.<sup>25</sup> While Nehru celebrated Bhakra-Nangal, where ‘thousands and lakhs of men have worked, have shed their blood and sweat and laid down their lives as well,’ rhetorically asking ‘[w]here can be a greater and holier place than this, which we can regard as higher?’, in reality these projects often contributed to the break-up of communities, creating persistent poverty.<sup>26</sup>

The large dam projects of the 1950s and 1960s did not elicit significant protests, despite displacing tens of thousands of people. According to Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, the lack of significant protest could be attributed to the widespread trust in the government of the newly independent state, namely that it would act on behalf of the entire population.<sup>27</sup> This changed in later years, as the state became increasingly associated with a narrow cosmopolitan elite.<sup>28</sup> From the early 1970s onwards, local hostility increased, in part because resettlement invariably proved inadequate, in part because other protest movements such as *Chipko Andolan* had attracted significant political and media interest.<sup>29</sup> Over time, it also became apparent that the promised practical benefits had failed to materialise, with dams costing far more than budgeted for and delivering less electricity than expected.<sup>30</sup>

All the big dam-building projects of the 1950s and 1960s featured frequently in the British press. Coverage of these infrastructure works invariably set out the benefits of improved irrigation, flood control and hydro-electric power, alongside the need for investments in education and the contributions of Western funding and technical assistance.<sup>31</sup> But dams also became part of the Cold War discourse, with the *Daily Telegraph* remarking in October 1954 that progress in this area meant ‘a strengthening of India’s domestic resistance to Communist subversion.’<sup>32</sup> Much attention was given too to the role of the Soviet Union in the Aswan project – ‘Russians on the Nile’ was the *Sunday Times* headline in September 1962 – and the displacement of the Nubian temples and people.<sup>33</sup> In 1957 and 1958, floods on the Zambezi river and the flooding of the Kariba dam caught the newspaper

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 151-52; Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1995), p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, p. 3; D'Souza, pp. 115-17; McCully, pp. 173-74.

<sup>27</sup> Gadgil and Guha, p. 63. See also Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (tenth anniversary edition), (New York: Ecco Press, 2019), pp. 221-22.

<sup>28</sup> Gadgil and Guha, p. 63.

<sup>29</sup> *Chipko Andolan* was a Himalayan village movement, which started its campaign to halt deforestation in the early 1970s. See Gadgil and Guha, p. 72; Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (expanded edition), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 152-53; p. 178.

<sup>30</sup> McCully, p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> For example, [Anon.], ‘The Colombo Plan’, *The Times* 29 November 1950, p. 3; [Anon.], ‘Start of the Colombo Plan’, *Economist*, 7 July 1951, p. 30; [Anon.], ‘The Damodar Valley Scheme’, *Financial Times*, 4 December 1953, p. 6; Daniel Duxbury, ‘The New India’, *Financial Times*, 13 August 1956, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Eric Downton, ‘India’s Way Ahead’, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 1954, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Mansfield, ‘Russians on the Nile’, *Sunday Times*, 23 September 1962, pp. 14-16. See also: [Anon.], ‘Building Turbines at the Aswan Dam’, *The Times*, 6 April 1956, p. 6; [Anon.], ‘Nubian Temples Threatened by the Aswan Dam’, *Daily Telegraph*, 30 November 1959, p. 14; John Tunstall, ‘Will the Nile Claim Abu Simbel?’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 15 August 1965, p. 13.

headlines. The latter stories are of interest as they bear a striking resemblance to Markandaya's plot, including the threat to the coffer dams, concerns about the construction timetable, the tragic deaths of local labourers and the description of the floods as a race between the river and Western technology.<sup>34</sup> Of note too is the publication of another dam novel in November 1969 by the British novelist John Bourne – *The Dam Builders* – which fictionalises the construction of a giant dam project in post-war Persia.<sup>35</sup> Bourne's novel is less political than Han's and Markandaya's work and endorses mainstream development thinking. The dam will bring electricity to Persia's main cities and the disappearance of a local village is seen as acceptable collateral damage.

In sum, dam building in the 1950s and 1960s served multiple interests, bringing together political leaders in the newly independent nations, global corporations and international development agencies. Cold War dynamics intermingled with humanitarian concerns; nation building with the capitalist search for investment returns. Underpinning these various interests was a common belief in the possibilities of science and engineering to bring about economic growth and social progress, and few considered the environmental impact of large dams. A similar belief drives the opening pages of *The Coffer Dams*, as a distinctly didactic third-person narrator, at times difficult to distinguish from the dam's chief engineer, describes the initial stages of the project:

the access routes mapped, the lines of communication established, a road cut down the craggy hillside from work site to base camp for the heavy lorries that brought up equipment and supplies. [...] workshop and work buildings, loading and unloading bays, the car maintenance sheds, the workers' quarters, the engineers' bungalows, the amenity buildings, the water tower, ice and filtration plant, pumping and power stations. (2-3)

Mirroring some of Nehru's overblown rhetoric, the narrator compares the giant project to a great, beating heart:

a powerful heart, powered to match a project ambitious in its scope and nature: a project that looked at the human coin of future centuries, and envisaged harnessing to its needs the turbulent river that rose in the lakes and valleys of the south Indian highlands and thundered through inaccessible gorges of its hills and jungles down to the plains with prodigal waste. (3)

It is clear too that the dam is an object of national pride – for the Indian engineer Krishnan, '[t]he whole reputation and prestige of the government is at stake' (12). However, as I show in the next two sections, *The Coffer Dams* offers an early critique of both the discourse of development and the environmental impact of dam building.

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<sup>34</sup> For example, [Anon.], 'Zambezi Overflows Cofferdams: Kariba Dam Drama', *The Times*, 18 March 1957, p. 8; [Anon.], 'Race with Time at Kariba', *The Times*, 5 April 1957, p. 11; Ian Colvin, 'High Stakes on the Zambesi', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 March 1958, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> John Bourne was the pseudonym adopted by the crime writer Owen John, a chartered accountant and war-time Special Operations agent in the Middle East.

### ***The Coffer Dams: A dialogic perspective on development***

Economists of the 1950s and 1960s believed in the transformational power of large-scale industrialisation, supported by a combination of state support, foreign capital and technical assistance. In turn, these projects would have significant spill-over effects, increasing income levels, improving health and education, and reducing absolute poverty. For *The Coffer Dams*' narrator, it is indisputable that the project will bring prosperity to the valley in the form of protection from the vagaries of nature:

The people who lived by its waters were grateful, but wary. They propitiated it with sacrifice and ceremony, and strengthened the banks with clay when the water levels rose. Sometimes when the rains failed there was no river at all, only a trickle that did not percolate through to the shallowest irrigation channels of their parched fields. At other times the land was inundated; they saw their crops drowned beneath spreading lakes, their mud huts dissolved to a lumpy brown soup and carried away on the flood tide. At both times they prayed to God, they never blamed him. It was their fate.

All this the planners of the new India, flanked by their technical advisers, had passionately expounded. (3)

Yet even at this early stage in the novel, there are indications that the narrator's confidence in the benefits for the local population may be problematic. Clinton is uninterested in the 'dreary saga of a hapless peasantry' (3); the Indian technocrats happily 'turned from the woes of the people to a discussion of the project' (3); the valley people are silent and spoken for by British and Indian experts who are 'speaking the same language' (3). As the narrative proceeds, Clinton and the omniscient narrator are confronted with a chorus of competing voices, some in line with mainstream developmental thinking, others espousing a more critical stance. Importantly, the fictional debate is not limited to a critique of neocolonialism, as argued by Jani, but as I will show next, reflects a broader range of competing visions of the aims and means of post-war modernisation efforts.

Throughout, the project is marked by cross-cultural tensions, with protracted negotiations on the construction schedule between Clinton and the government in Delhi, as 'design and financing [are] minutely scrutinized and modified at each stage' (10). Locally, Krishnan is critical of the 'peremptory British planning' (12), which underplays the risks arising from monsoon cycles, solar flares and labour troubles (12), while his British counterpart, Bob Rawlings, is incredulous at Krishnan's objections, 'marvelling that a qualified engineer could imagine that at this stage wholesale amendments could be made to a minutely planned, intricately dovetailed construction project' (12-13).

Markandaya's dialogue further shows how lingering imperial attitudes affect relationships between Britons and Indians. Independence has failed to modify Rawling's racialist views: 'Indians, he thought, were an excitable breed, a quality that diminished rational behaviour. [...] independence nourished these volatile roots, whose full flower was the grandiose and impractical planning one saw in the new free territories from Kenya to Uganda' (13). In contrast, Mackendrick appreciates what this flagship project means for the new nation-state, yet cannot avoid the trope of the backward nation,

reflecting on ‘the pulsing jealousy and pride that a poor nation could feel and transmit to its nationals: the pride of an ancient civilization limping behind in the modern race, called backward everywhere except to its face and underdeveloped in diplomatic confrontation’ (12). In contrast, Krishnan’s resentment is a recurrent feature in the novel, and he and his Indian colleagues are keenly aware of their dependence on Western expertise and capital:

Brush us off like flies, he thought, hurt and insult like splinters under his skin; despise us because they are experts and we are just beginning. Beginners, he repeated bitterly, barred from knowledge and power as from the secrets of a master guild; and the memory of those neglectful years lay in deep accusing pools in his mind. But it’s over now, he said to himself. Our day is coming. The day when they will listen to us. (13-14)

Similarly, the trainee Gopal Rao acknowledges the unequal economic relationship, asserting that ‘[a]id to underdeveloped countries is not a free gift, there are strings attached to it, for instance all the equipment here, we have to buy from Britain with our loan’ (64-65). Although he receives a firm rebuttal, it is worth noting that his British interlocutors are not presented in the best light, thus shifting the reader’s sympathy towards the young Indian:

‘But you don’t repay it, do you boy.’ Henderson wagged his heavy, liquor-logged face loosely in front of Gopal. ‘So what does a loan become? I ask you, what does it become?’  
‘We pay interest,’ said Gopal unhappily. He was not too sure about his facts.  
[...]  
‘The taxes we pay,’ said Mrs Henderson, ‘simply to make these “loans”!’  
‘Beats me why we do,’ said Mrs Galbraith resignedly, helping herself to a passing vol-au-vent,  
‘No mugs like English mugs, they say.’ (65)

As the construction of the dam proceeds, further tensions surface, relating to Clinton’s unrelenting timetable, and the narrative becomes increasingly critical of the British management of the project. Several incidents stand out in this regard. First, when drums of oil disappear, Clinton does not hesitate to withhold the wages of the local labourers, as labour was ‘[e]xpendable. A second thousand to be had for the picking where the first thousand had come from’ (69). Earlier, this labour force is described as the product of Mackendrick’s ‘efficient recruiting organization [which] replaced one dark wave of humanity by another’ (6). Dismissing the distress reduced pay may cause – ‘They’re affluent by their standards’ (52) – Clinton further claims that the Indian government is on their side – ‘They want this thing finished on time’ (52) – thus illustrating the power of foreign capital and the complicity of the national government. Second, when discussing whether to breach the coffer dams in order to prevent the possible flooding of the Adivasi village – a finely balanced decision given the uncertainty associated with the weather forecast – Clinton refuses to reconsider the proposed course of action, remarking: ‘It is a calculated risk, [...] as sometimes one is forced. Which one has to take, since there is no other way’ (230). This and Mackendrick’s frank response – ‘It is not, [...] we who take the risk. We make the calculations, it is they who run the risk’ (230) – shows that the villagers have been reduced to the terms of a risk calculation.

Nehru's economic model of 'take off' was predicated on the assumption that the economy could be subject to planning and control.<sup>36</sup> Yet Clinton's meticulous project management is thwarted by bureaucratic inefficiency, focalised through Rawling's complaints during his mission to locate missing equipment:

Sometimes it seemed to him that the country was maliciously bent on informing him it did not work that way. In the heat and dust, the soulless air conditioning of unnumerable offices, he felt the massive weight of inertia pressing on him. (74)

When the equipment finally arrives, Clinton reluctantly accepts the damaged crane, reflecting that 'he wouldn't stand for this kind of thing in England so why in this damned country? [...] a country whose all-out effort churned up a dozen power-driven cranes per annum or whatever the figure was' (89-90). Here Markandaya's British characters voice concerns that are remarkably similar to those of the economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, who in *Asian Drama* (1968) attributed the failure of India's take-off to inertia, institutional obstacles and what he called the 'soft state,' alongside the absence of policies aimed at raising labour productivity.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, Markandaya's attention to the politics and economics of dam building suggests a close affinity with the post-war debates on development and infrastructure investment. Contesting the period's dominant discourse, she points to the power of global capital, the close cooperation of the government and elite of the new nation-state with foreign corporates, and the unequal distribution of the gains (and costs) of development projects. As such, she draws the reader's attention to the power relationship between former coloniser and colonised, thus capturing the entanglement of neocolonialism, residual imperial ideas and the ambitions of developmental policies. Highlighting the tensions between Western project management and Indian bureaucracy, she questions the belief that industrialisation and economic planning would bring about the promised 'take-off.' As I will show in the next section, Markandaya also registers the social and environmental consequences of the project, resulting in a more damning critique of development than Han's text achieves.

### **Dam building and the environment in *The Coffer Dams***

As he watched the construction of the Bhakra-Nangal Dam, Nehru remarked on India's mighty rivers 'traversing thousands of miles' across mountains and plains, to be channelled and diverted, so they might be controlled 'in a friendly way.'<sup>38</sup> For Nehru, the dam signified 'the progress of a living nation' and 'no one can arrest its progress.'<sup>39</sup> But no mention is made of the immediate environmental

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<sup>36</sup> Khilnani, pp. 76-78; pp. 86-88.

<sup>37</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Enquiry into the Poverty of Nations* (abridged in one volume), (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 150. The 'soft state' fails to enact new policies or place new obligations on its people, thus retarding modernisation efforts (p. 35). See also Leys, *Rise & Fall*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>38</sup> *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, p. 3. This imagery departs from the traditional Indian belief in the sacred river, source of prosperity, possessor of mysterious powers and object of protection and devotion, rather than control (Shiva, *Water Wars*, pp. 131-39).

<sup>39</sup> *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, p. 4.

impact, or the long-term changes to the ecosystem. No mention either of the cost born by local communities, who are literally inundated by development and become ‘ecologically unmoored.’<sup>40</sup> Nehru’s rhetoric of control is mirrored in *The Cofferd Dams*, as the narrator describes the plans to alter the river’s flow – ‘It ran deeply here, this river which two thousand men and ten thousand tons of equipment had so far assembled to tame’ (29) – and conveys Clinton’s confidence that he will be able to control this ancient and wild landscape:

He had first to alter the course of the river: block its flow at the upstream coffer dam, and deflect the rising waters into a channel cut in the east bank and curving in a wide arc from the upstream barrage to a point north of the downstream coffer where the river would resume its natural flow. In these still waters, the motionless unnatural lake created between the coffers, the main dam would grow. (29)

Now the excavators coughed and grunted, biting into granite torn loose by dynamite. South of the main excavation area, where the river bed would lie, drills and shovels worked with precision, chiselling away rock in the natural cleft to take the gates that would control the flow of the river. [...] Five tons, every two minutes, carved from river bank to create the channel into which the river would run. (52)

As the building progresses, the violence perpetrated on the landscape becomes increasingly apparent. With the introduction of round-the-clock working, the workers have been reduced to mere ‘silhouettes’ (105) in a landscape robbed of its natural darkness and night-time silence:

With the sudden, peremptory lunge into darkness the arc lights grew strident again. The harsh explosive glare, like flaring naphtha, cut out and lit the whole scene sharply, giving it the blue-sheen edge of steel. [...] In the shattered plateau, dwarfed by the debris left from blasting, men were at work; blue flame leapt and spurted from the machines they wielded, the electric shovels and diggers that bit into and gouged out rock. (105)

Using natural imagery, Markandaya’s narrator mounts a powerful critique of the large dam projects that were taking place all over India, in the process condemning both Western contractors and the Indian government in New Delhi. But, in a further illustration of her novel’s dialogism, British and Indian characters occupy a range of positions, suggesting that the nature-technology trade-off cannot be reduced to a simple East-West binary. An example is the brief dialogue between Lefevre, a British expert in river systems, and his assistant Gopal. As the river level is rising and threatening the local village, Lefevre admits that the dams ‘have created their own dangers, [...] magnified by us immeasurably’ (231), but Gopal hangs on to the belief that ‘[t]he dams were built for the benefit of the people’ (230), adding that these dangers existed before (231).

Significantly, Markandaya equates the indigenous character Bashiam with the post-war belief in the power of technology and the ability of men to master nature.<sup>41</sup> In common with Clinton, Bashiam

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<sup>40</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 152.

<sup>41</sup> Bashiam’s character is reminiscent of Peroo in Rudyard Kipling’s story *The Bridge-Builders* (1893), in that he combines indigenous knowledge of the power of nature (in Peroo’s case the Ganges) with a commitment to Western technology.

has developed a passion for the machines ‘that Clinton Mackendrick had assembled like a panzer army’ (42) and ‘the extreme functional beauty of each working part, the powerful action of steel tongue in oiled groove, of whirring flywheel and cog’ (42). Seduced by technology, he ‘had followed the traditional craft of woodcutting until they began building the hydroelectric station’ (18) and ‘had gone back out of curiosity, and stayed spellbound by the workings of strange powerful turbines’ (18). Bashiam’s commitment to the project’s modernisation aims stems as much from this encounter, as from his knowledge of the uncontrollable ways of the river:

The mainstream of memory was clogged with sharper happenings, with storm and rain, the long drought, a periodically overflowing river and precipitate flight from it. [...] he shivered, remembering the sodden huts, the cold, the uncertainty, the comfortless ritual of departure, the incantations of a bewildered clan to an immune god. (43)

Here, Bashiam represents the Nehruvian belief in progress through industrialisation, even though he is keenly aware of his and the tribe’s losses. Adding complexity to the debate, Markandaya endows her character with contradictory views on the interaction of humans with the natural environment, typifying Bakhtin’s characterisation of internally dialogised speech as containing two voices or world views. However, she does not give him a strong enough voice to challenge Western scientific knowledge directly. Instead, Bashiam’s resistance, which counters Clinton’s confidence in detailed drawings and statistics, remains unexpressed:

It was this older knowledge that inhibited him, prevented him falling in line with the others. They made their plans, seduced by statistics: but he had seen what a cyclone could do, [...] knew what mincemeat a rogue monsoon could make in one night of the most careful design. (18)

Close examination of the novel’s numerous secondary characters reveals the extent to which Markandaya gives room to both proponents and critics of the dam project, while the narrator oscillates between the two positions. Arguably, her narrative captures Arturo Escobar’s later description of development as ‘an act of cognitive and social domination.’<sup>42</sup> Western voices dominate the debate and frequently overshadow those Asian characters who warn that the benefits to the nation and its rural poor may outstrip the costs to the environment. Meanwhile, Bashiam’s superior knowledge of the river and weather system is overlooked by the British engineers: ‘the towering and voracious terms of modern commitment diminished him to insignificance’ (19).

It is clear that the works are having a drastic impact on the villagers’ wellbeing, both in the short term, as they suffer from the noise and the dust, and in the longer term, as a more fragile ecosystem is likely to threaten their livelihoods:

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<sup>42</sup> Arturo Escobar, ‘Anthropology and the Development Encounter: The Making and Marketing of Development Anthropology’, in *American Ethnologist*, 18:4 (1991), 658-82 (p. 675). Escobar further views development as a ‘historically produced discourse’ (*Encountering*, p. 6), which involves the creation of knowledge (the ‘Third World’) alongside practices, activities and institutions, leading to targeted policy interventions and the exercise of power (*ibid.*, pp. 10-11).



The village, upriver, felt the onslaught most, the hill at whose base the tribesmen were encamped acting as a peculiarly effective baffle board, bouncing sound and shock waves off the shallow, boulder-strewn basin where they had pitched their huts.

[...]

Depending on water, they were tied to the river. But downstream the ramifications of building requisitioned the river banks until the terrain grew untenable. Upstream beyond the sheltering hill, they and their huts would be in the path of the south-west monsoon winds. [...] Physically speaking no further retreat was left. So they stayed where they were, while the bed of the valley quaked, and dust flew through the thatch on their ramshackle huts and settled grittily in every nook and cranny. (106-07)

The villagers have become ‘developmental refugees,’ who are expelled from their ancestral lands and become the invisible victims of the slow violence engendered by development, anticipating later postcolonial readings of the suffering caused by rural eviction.<sup>43</sup> In a further critique of the combined ecological and social impact of the dam works, we see the village’s social fabric unravel, as the young men are attracted by the money offered by Mackendrick – ‘Money, money. They are becoming as money-mad as you foreigners are’ (71) – and have given up on their traditional hunting activities. Consequently, the headman bemoans, they are short of food, while the jungle is full of game, and require money ‘for that rubbish they buy from the camp shop[?]. Tin cans and cardboard boots, and scented pigs’ grease to plaster on their hair’ (72). Despite official promises of future prosperity, the Clinton-Mackendrick dam ends up taking away more than it gives to the rural poor, with the headman’s prophetic words – ‘they will learn what is real and mourn what is lost. [...] the Great Dam will take them, the maneater will have its flesh’ (72) – hinting at the unequal distribution of the costs and benefits of the project.

In common with *The Mountain Is Young*, *The Coffin Dams* interrogates the post-war development discourse and the prevailing belief in the welfare-enhancing potential of modern technology. Both authors use the natural environment, and in particular the imagery of the mountain and the river, to indicate the limits of Western technology and expose the disastrous consequences for local people and the natural environment. At the same time, neither text fully dismisses the discourse of development, nor the potential of infrastructure investment to improve people’s lives, thus injecting an element of ambiguity into their critical interrogations. Arguably, Han’s novel makes a stronger case *for* development, as there is a greater emphasis on the hardship suffered by Nepal’s rural poor resulting from annual flooding. Furthermore, Han employs her Asian characters to demonstrate the need for a local voice in the development projects led by Western experts, even though she stops short of proposing a blueprint for community-led development. In contrast, through her detailed descriptions of the construction site and its ant-like labour force, Markandaya emphasises the

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<sup>43</sup> Nixon further characterises the displaced as ‘surplus’ people, ‘disposable’ because their culture is perceived of lesser value or because their ancestral claims on the land are deemed to have no legal basis (*Slow Violence*, p. 19; p. 151; pp. 163-65). McCully reports that by the late 1990s, between 16 and 38 million people had been displaced in India (p. xxxi).

environmental and societal damage of large infrastructure works, even as she silences some of her critical voices at key points in the narrative. Moreover, her account is more pessimistic, underlining the irreversibility of environmental damage, and possibly reflecting the mounting consensus that the post-war model of growth-led development had failed to deliver the promised benefits, as well as India's growing disillusion with Nehruvian politics.<sup>44</sup>

### **Developmental refugees and the postcolonial author**

In 1999, the Indian novelist Arundhati Roy published *The Greater Common Good*, an essay in which she attacked the Indian government for its refusal to address the plight of the millions of people displaced by the Sardar Sarovar and other dam projects. Reflecting on the advocacy role of high-profile postcolonial writers, such as Roy and the Nigerian writer-activist Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995), Nixon questions their ability to act as spokesperson for the displaced people: 'Who gets to see, and from where?'<sup>45</sup> Nixon is concerned with understanding how the writer-activist makes the slow violence of large infrastructure projects visible; how imaginative writing can help counter the indifference encountered by unempowered communities; and what strategies postcolonial authors use to reach both national and international audiences.<sup>46</sup> Writing thirty years before Roy burst on the scene, Markandaya's novel too narrates the 'unseen' violence suffered by developmental refugees.<sup>47</sup>

Big dams, Nixon argues, are diversionary, not only in the sense of diverting water, but they divert resources from the powerless to the powerful, and through narrative interventions divert attention away from unimagined communities.<sup>48</sup> But whereas Nixon concentrates on the fiction and non-fiction of writer-activists of the 1980s and 1990s, my interest is in an earlier incarnation of this critique – the 1960s middlebrow novel – and the potential of this quintessentially middle-class genre to give voice to the environmentalism of the poor. In this section, I examine Markandaya's advocacy role within the context of the political middlebrow, considering first, the character of Helen, and second, the novel's ambiguous ending.

Early on in the novel, Helen emerges as Markandaya's main spokesperson for the Adivasis, when she finds some broken pottery and learns from her husband that it belonged to the local people, who 'occupied a site we needed [...] an encampment of sorts and it had to be moved and it was' (23-24). For Clinton, the villagers are what Nixon terms 'inconveniencing anachronisms in a globalizing

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<sup>44</sup> After Nehru's death in 1964, the government's priorities shifted towards modernising agriculture (the Green Revolution) (Khilnani, p. 90).

<sup>45</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 15. Saro-Wiwa campaigned against the environmental degradation of the Niger delta, caused by the petroleum company Shell (Huggan and Tiffin, pp. 37-42).

<sup>46</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, pp. 15-16; pp. 23-24.

<sup>47</sup> Similar concerns are expressed by Lessing, who reports on the cost of the Kariba project, including the poor labour conditions, the forced resettlement of African tribes and the local resentment at a project serving Western interests. Doris Lessing, 'The Kariba Project', *New Statesman and Nation*, 9 June 1956, pp. 647-48.

<sup>48</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 172. Lessing writes: 'Our experience is that it is the white people who benefit from development, never the Africans' ('Kariba,' p. 647).

economy,' but for Helen, they are a 'whole community that had been persuaded to move' (25).<sup>49</sup>

Dismissed by Clinton as 'that little episode' (23), a distraught Helen reflects on the British tactics:

Helen sat alone in the darkness, turning over in her hands the broken bits of pottery. It had been part of some woman's life once, not very long ago: she had filled it with water and scoured it, cooked in it and fed her family [...] Then they had all gone away and the vessels had been broken and left behind. Not one or two: enough for several families, the cooking pots of a whole community. (24)

Helen also contests the discourse of development and its implied power tactics: 'Persuasion, she thought. It was the brand of this century' (25). Elsewhere, she resorts to the discourse's trope of the poor, describing the hill tribes as '[a] backward people, whose primeval ways had exasperated successive governments, monumental impediment in the path of progressive companies and administrations' (71), even as she is aware that the construction project is altering the Adivasi way of life – 'they had felt the glancing blow of social change' (71).

In Helen, Markandaya has created a woman protagonist, who is alert to the plight of the Adivasi community, learns their language and is willing to challenge her technocrat husband. However, her understanding of India's history lacks depth – 'History, for her, still largely lay between the covers of a book,' the narrator comments (40) – and her attempt to contest India's commitment to modernisation as she queries Bashiam's desire for a better way of life falters in his evocation of the poverty of his childhood (42-43). There are remnants of Orientalism too in her thinking: 'It was simply that one expected people like Bashiam – a backward people – to be content with natural things like hills and woods and a water pump or two' (42). Furthermore, Helen's agency is limited, as she chooses not to challenge the project's drain on local resources:

Helen, distressed, saw with the headman's eyes the visible deterioration: the uprooted palings lying where they had fallen in muddy troughs of their own creation, the unfilled subsidence craters left by intensified blasting, the ragged come-apart thatching. In a matter of weeks the damage was plain, a perpetuating circle that gained momentum as the dams drained men from the tribe. She could not, however, speak of it either to her husband, or to Mackendrick, or even to Bashiam, recognizing there was nothing to be done. (151)

Likewise, her commentary on the poverty of the village dwellings is rebuffed by Krishnan, the novel's most authoritative Indian voice: 'Of course they seem flyaway to you, you are used to better things. Unfortunately our people are not. They've become used to being done out of their rights' (40).

Hence, the inconsistencies in the characterisation of this key protagonist are a first indication of the limitations of the elite author to speak on behalf of the invisible communities. Although Helen is aware of the real harm done to the indigenous people, the narrator weakens her impact by highlighting her personal uncertainties and by consigning her to the role of passive observer at key points in the narrative. Additionally, *The Coffer Dam*'s particular dialogism, combining an authoritative narrator and heavy reliance on free indirect speech to communicate unspoken thoughts,

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<sup>49</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 164.

further undermines the effectiveness of the author's advocacy role. In the end, neither Bashiam, nor Helen are sufficiently empowered to challenge what Nixon calls the 'celebratory developmental rhetoric' of politicians and technocrats.<sup>50</sup>

Turning now to the novel's closing pages, *The Coffey Dams* ends with the hoped-for cessation of the rains and the preservation of the coffer dams. Although the novel appears to offer a one-sided resolution – the dam building project continues, suggesting that the combined efforts of the global engineering firm and the national government will triumph – the ending invites several, competing interpretations. On the one hand, Clinton is absent in the final scene, while Helen and Mackendrick contemplate the receding waters. Jani believes that their new-found alliance can be read as tempering the novel's criticism of Clinton & Mackendrick, and hints at the possibility of a new, kinder modernity.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, although the village settlement has been saved, Bashiam will move on to another project, and with the death of the elderly headman, no one will take up the case of the Adivasis. Reflecting on this ambiguous ending, Jani suggests that the novel's take on modernity can be read from two distinct perspectives: 'a subaltern-centered one whose main interest is in halting its destructive path, and a nation-statist and/or imperialist one in which development itself signifies progress.'<sup>52</sup> Modernity appears so threatening, he elaborates, that it undermines the radical critique of Markandaya's text and the possibility of local resistance: the dam, symbol of the modern India, is there to stay.<sup>53</sup> Yet, Jani also views the novel's ending as signifying the author's insistence on the need to remember the Adivasis as the nation-state continues on its path to modernity.<sup>54</sup>

While agreeing with the ambiguity of the novel's ending, I would add that the final lines also illustrate the limits of the postcolonial author's advocacy role:

They picked their way out, into the watery landscape and through the aftermath of storm to the river to look, and saw that the banks held firm and the water levels were falling, which was of moment to them. While others who looked, their concerns being different, saw only the coffers, whose formidable ribs rose bleached and clean in the washed air above the turbulent river. (235)

Two features stand out. First, the novel's varied cast of characters, with their disparate opinions and prejudices, has disappeared from view, leaving just Helen and Mackendrick. The multiplicity of viewpoints has been replaced by a single vision, confirming the value of the project. Second, the villagers have not only been reduced to silent bystanders, waiting for the distant mountain ridges to be clear of rain, they are no longer visible, and it is not clear who the 'others' are. Recalling Nixon's question 'Who gets to see, and from where?', at this point it is unclear whether the implied author is still speaking on behalf of the Adivasis. In these final pages the novel appears to have abandoned the possibility of resistance to the dam project, despite its earlier reservations. '[B]leached and clean'

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>51</sup> Jani, p. 95.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

(235), the lifeless construction appears to have won the battle with the turbulent river. The ‘unimagined community’ will continue to be side-lined in the national narrative, their displacement a ‘little episode’ (23) that can be forgotten. The project’s ‘slow violence’ is likely to continue unabated, as the partnership between technocrats, financiers and government officials appears intact.

My reading of *The Coffer Dams* therefore suggests that Markandaya does not fully succeed in visualising or dramatising what Nixon calls the ‘casualties of the “submergence zone.”’<sup>55</sup> The novel’s ambivalence, seen earlier in its critical dialogue on development and here in relation to its ending, constrains its ability to give imaginative expression to the suffering of the invisible communities. However, Markandaya does succeed in foregrounding the contradictions underpinning the discourse and practices of development. Interestingly, both Han and Markandaya deploy white middle-class protagonists to channel their advocacy on behalf of the displaced poor, possibly a gesture towards the implied (white) reader. Nevertheless, their mixed reception illustrates the challenges faced by elite authors when narrating the stories of developmental refugees. The next section examines *The Coffer Dam*’s reception in more detail.

### Readers, development and the environment

Despite endorsements from prominent writers in newspaper adverts – John Masters called it an ‘absorbing tale about mechanical strength and spiritual weakness,’ while Paul Scott judged her ‘fictional invasion of a man’s world [...] wholly successful,’ adding that ‘Miss Markandaya is amongst the best and certainly the most adventurous Indian writers’ – *The Coffer Dams* received modest media coverage in Britain.<sup>56</sup> In the first instance, British reviewers appeared to appreciate its documentary quality. A short summary in the *Sunday Telegraph* commented on Markandaya’s ability to ‘capture the excitement of the operations, the clash of personalities and the tensions between the races with vigour, subtlety and great assurance in setting down the technical detail.’<sup>57</sup> Admirers of her fiction, the reviewer opined, will ‘surely be confirmed in their enthusiasm.’<sup>58</sup> Likewise, the *Listener* praised the novel’s ‘complex and delicate language’ and its knowledge of ‘objects and men at work.’<sup>59</sup>

The reviewers were impressed with its main theme – the conflict between technology and humanism – and praised Markandaya for her fairness in presenting the different viewpoints, thus acknowledging the dialogic nature of her novel. The *Sunday Times* succinctly described the narrative as ‘[t]ycoon engineer ruthlessly exploits men and resources to build monster dam, while his wife supports the interests of local Indian villagers.’<sup>60</sup> This reviewer underscored Markandaya’s refashioning of the feminine novel: ‘A restrained, intelligent novel by a woman who refreshingly does

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<sup>55</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 161.

<sup>56</sup> *The Times*, 10 May 1969, p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> Rivers Scott, ‘Sad Clashes in the Clerical Cloth’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 11 May 1969, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth Graham, ‘Wind and Shadow’, *Listener*, 15 May 1969, p. 636.

<sup>60</sup> [Anon.], ‘Short Reports’, *Sunday Times*, 20 July 1969, p. 50.

more than offer the fashionable feminine view of love and marriage.’<sup>61</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* too praised Markandaya’s command of the technicalities of dam building, as well as her ‘acute sensibility’ in evoking the conflicts this project arouses, adding that the ‘modern dam that displaces whole communities [...] offers splendid dramatic opportunities to novelists and film-makers.’<sup>62</sup>

Reviewers were interested too in the conflict between Clinton and Helen, with the *TLS* describing the former as a ‘modern, production-engineering type’ and the latter as someone ‘who believes that people, with their different cultures evolved over millennia, are more than worth a dam.’<sup>63</sup> For the *TLS* reviewer, Markandaya’s portrayal of Clinton was ‘authentic and fascinating.’<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the *Listener* described Clinton as ‘the harsh western pragmatist, the archetypal dam-and-empire-builder’ and his wife as ‘all sympathy and openness.’<sup>65</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* drew attention to the tension between Clinton and his Indian labour force, and highlighted the racial prejudices of some of the British characters: ‘Miss Markandaya makes it clear where her sympathies lie: she is tart about smug British obtuseness, but is never unfair.’<sup>66</sup>

While none of the reviewers questioned the novel’s readability, some were critical of its style, others of its ending. The *TLS* described *The Cofferdams* as a ‘competent, readable novel, full of technology and tension, which leaves the reader with the impression that it has come off the drawing-board rather than out of the imagination.’<sup>67</sup> Describing the narrative as ‘[t]aut, well-told, full of know-how’ and ‘push[ing] effectively ahead until the climax,’ the reviewer was disappointed though with the novel’s ending:

when the central question has to be asked and answered – is Clinton to make concessions to elemental forces, and acknowledge that his coffer dams, interim structures, are the weaker vessels? – Kamala Markandaya neglects her realism in order to pursue the visionary gleam, and blurs her effect with too much declamation.<sup>68</sup>

The *Listener* too found fault with the novel’s final chapters, observing that as the tension mounts and the monsoon approaches, ‘quite suddenly, unforgivably, the style completely changes: syntax becomes distorted, dialogue as stiffly mannered as narrative. Engineering passes into phantasmagoria.’<sup>69</sup> This reviewer further pointed to its ‘patently schematic’ characterisation, but added that this shortcoming was compensated by the variety of types, ‘from Memsahib to embittered Nationalist, who thicken out the dense interplay of attitudes to life.’<sup>70</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* reviewer found Markandaya’s writing technique irritating – ‘chopped-up sentences’ – but concluded that the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Maxwell Scott, ‘Recent Fiction’, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 May 1969, p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> [Anon.], ‘Other New Novels’, *TLS*, 12 June 1969, p. 643.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Graham, p. 636.

<sup>66</sup> Scott, 8 May 1969, p. 22.

<sup>67</sup> *TLS*, 12 June 1969, p. 643.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Graham, p. 636.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

novel was ‘extraordinarily effective in conveying the claustrophobic feelings of a potentially explosive community.’<sup>71</sup>

Reviewers consistently underlined the importance of accessible prose, characterisation, plot and resolution – key formal characteristics of the middlebrow – and foregrounded the reader’s interest in realistic detail, as well as the human experience. Interestingly, the reviewers appeared to endorse Markandaya’s determination to push the boundaries of the female, domestic middlebrow, seemingly impressed with her literary foray into the (masculine) area of engineering. At the same time, they emphasised the need to carefully balance documentary and stylistic qualities. Whereas Han’s reviewers were unimpressed with the novel’s romance plot and deplored excesses in characterisation, Markandaya’s critics disliked her ambiguous ending and lifeless dialogue.<sup>72</sup> However, as seen too in chapter 4, reviewers appeared to overlook *The Coffey Dam*’s political agenda, notably its critical engagement with the discourse of development. Acting as ‘gatekeepers,’ reviewers imposed a middlebrow aesthetic, which ranked the adherence to certain formal criteria above political commitment, a recurrent theme in this thesis. Of note too is that reviewers’ interest was confined to *The Coffey Dam*’s European characters, suggesting that they failed to register the author’s efforts to mediate non-Western viewpoints.

Viewed within the broader context of this thesis, *The Coffey Dams*’ reviewers were remarkably consistent in their emphasis on the essential ingredients of fiction that was likely to appeal to their readership. Readers of middlebrow novels, they imply, expect strong plots, interesting characters and lively prose, and they enjoy detailed descriptions of place and context. There is no indication that this audience is tiring of realist fiction – David Lodge’s ‘main road’ – nor that a novel set in a former colony was destined to encounter disappointing sales. Indeed, two years later, V.S. Naipaul would win the Booker prize for his postcolonial novel *In a Free State* (1971), and so did J. G. Farrell for his re-telling of the 1857 Rebellion in *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973).<sup>73</sup> At the same time, little is made of those aspects of *The Coffey Dams* that would resonate most with twentieth-first-century readers – the vulnerability of the natural environment and its indigenous populations – supporting George’s claim that Markandaya was out of step with the political sensitivities of her time.<sup>74</sup>

In contrast, upon re-issue in 2020, the publisher’s blurb highlighted the ‘destructive consequences of “progress” [are] made clear in this prophetic novel first published in 1969.’ Additionally, Markandaya’s daughter Kim Oliver wrote a personal statement, paying tribute to its environmental awareness:

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<sup>71</sup> Scott, 8 May 1969, p. 22.

<sup>72</sup> In contrast to *The Mountain Is Young*, the romantic affair between Helen and Bashiam plays only a small part in the narrative. Jani argues that it serves as a vehicle for discussing the formation of new postcolonial identities (pp. 89-93).

<sup>73</sup> *In a Free State* is a composite novel, comprising short stories and a novella. Displacement is a key theme.

<sup>74</sup> George, ‘Where in the World’, p. 402; p. 406.

Kamala Markandaya [...] certainly did see the viciousness of exploiting a natural area and a powerless indigenous population, without regard to the rights of either. And she predicted that it would not be without consequences to the perpetrators.

[...]

But the book is a novel, not a treatise. The subtly written narrative of water, jungle and tribal settlement, versus dam, engineering and industrial construction, is intertwined with the lives of the characters, who are profoundly affected by the natural environment.<sup>75</sup>

Likewise, the critic Mark Rappolt described *The Coffer Dams* as ‘a novel about how we justify and then adapt to change, and the price we pay for it,’ adding:

While the novel suffers from the fact that the dam and its construction provides a somewhat disconnected stage set for this tragicomedy of clashing manners and customs, it nevertheless takes us to the roots of some of the key conflicts that have shaped our present. And ultimately, *The Coffer Dams* provides yet more evidence that Markandaya was not only one of the most acute analysts of the social conditions of her time but that, disturbingly, she continues to be that in ours.<sup>76</sup>

Despite a shared interest in the novel’s documentary characteristics, the 1969 and 2020 reviewers brought divergent expectations to their reading.<sup>77</sup> For the former, the abundant technical detail on dam construction was acceptable, as long as it did not undermine the novel’s narrative qualities. For the latter, the novel’s environmental politics were its prime attraction, even though these readers too alluded to desirable narrative attributes. The comparison – and similar observations were made in relation to Han’s novel – illustrates the precarious position of middlebrow fiction when it departs ‘too much’ from readers’ expectations.

### **Expatriates and the middlebrow novel**

The tropes of the domestic world, I have argued thus far, help shape the middlebrow novel’s engagement with political debates, whilst also capturing its readers’ interest in class and gender relations. Although at first sight, *The Coffer Dams* does not conform to this description, closer examination of its setting and characters reveals similarities with the novels discussed earlier in this thesis, in turn suggesting affinities with the broader middlebrow category.

In the first instance, Markandaya’s description of the British settlement, with its ‘neat small four-roomed boxes’ (5) and ‘trim square plots of emerging gardens’ (5), anchors the narrative in a version of the domestic world. Yet, in the new India, the ‘colony’ (5) – ‘Clinton’s Lines, [...] it brought back names of forgotten barracks and squares, names like Clive Lines and Wellesley Lines’ (1) – appears out of place, and in Clinton produces:

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<sup>75</sup> Kim Oliver, ‘The Coffer Dams’, 24 September 2020 <<https://www.hoperoadpublishing.com/the-coffer-dams-blog>>.

<sup>76</sup> Mark Rappolt, ‘Rediscovered: Kamala Markandaya’s “The Coffer Dams”’, *Art Review*, 26 October 2020 <<https://artreview.com/rediscovered-kamala-markandaya-the-coffer-dams/>>.

<sup>77</sup> See also the reviews on HopeRoad’s website: <<https://www.hoperoadpublishing.com/the-coffer-dams>>.



a confused feeling as if a bit of England had strayed on to soil where it had no business to be, as if a section of English housing estate, a scaled-down whitewashed version, had been improbably lodged in this corner site round a bend of river in India. (5)

Of interest is that the expatriate town is associated with distant memories of imperial anxiety, as well as uneasiness about the postcolonial present:

What had grown into a town was also a colony, with an establishment which the colonizers had not deliberately contrived, but which grew from their needs and fears, from tribal memories and anxieties of which they were hardly aware, from a nostalgic harking back to a hierarchy that, more or less, worked at home.

[...]

From within the invisible white stockade thus thrown up the new colonists peered at the vast sprawling enigma that they felt India to be. (32)

For many colonial Britons, political independence prompted a hasty return to the metropolis, whereas others chose to stay behind. They served as diplomats, technical experts and employees in multinational corporations in the newly independent nations or took up military or administrative posts in some of the remaining colonies.<sup>78</sup> In doing so, many experienced a marked drop in social and economic status, seeing positions of influence going to an emerging local elite, fictionalised, for example, in Santha Rama Rau's *Remember the House* (1956) and Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time to Be Happy* (1958). In *The Coffin Dams*, Markandaya employs tropes associated with the female middlebrow to describe this closed society of expatriates, which looks back on a receding colonial past and appears to hold on to outdated racial and cultural prejudices. In common with *The Flying Fox*, this critique is centred on the novel's female characters, Millie Rawlings in particular. Focalised through Helen, Millie represents the narrow-mindedness of British expatriates:

It was not Millie against whom she recoiled, it was the kind of activity she proposed to embroil them in. Coffee parties. Shooting. Jaunts to the nearest town that boasted a civilized club that possessed a dance band, a bar, and imported one-armed bandits. Shopping in the big city emporiums where smooth Indian shopkeepers, who knew how to treat vintage memsahibs, flattered and mulcted her shamelessly, their suave faces showing nothing of the contempt they felt. (34)

Millie finds it difficult to 'envisage any kind of relationship, apart from overseer and serf' (33) between (former) coloniser and colonised: 'Pre-war Africa had moulded her, and her African light adventures, turned overnight by Mau Mau into a grim and bloody business, had rendered the model cast-iron' (33). She also voices a nostalgia for a lifestyle that used to be open to the privileged few:

'Only a few left now,' she said. 'The memsahibs, I mean. Not the ones from Russia and Sweden and Salford, they're there all right, inheriting our earth... I mean the real mems like us, dearie, there's precious few of that breed left.' (100)

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<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 226-28.

To Helen, Millie's opinions seem 'redolent of the suburbs: stiff little fences erected by silly old women afraid of the rape of their minds' (34). As such, class and racial prejudices combine, with detail on clothing and looks contrasting Helen's youthfulness – 'cool poised Helen' (34), 'bare-armed, tanned, in an ivory linen shift that made the other women look overblown and overdressed' (63) – with Millie's fading looks:

'We must have a party,' said Millie. [...] She bit her nails, fretfully, spitting out flakes of red varnish that belonged to the past. [...] [She] stared at the grave [sic] marks on the backs of her hands, liver-coloured smudges that ran into each other. (156)

Emphasising 'the erosions of late middle age' (36), a distinctly unsympathetic narrator conveys the implied author's dislike of the outdated values Millie represents, and the bitterness felt at the loss of imperial privileges. In a further echo of the British expatriates in *The Flying Fox*, Rawlings and his wife are stranded, attracted by financial opportunities on the one hand, and unable to imagine a future in Britain on the other. A restless Millie scans possible future postings:

Not London, no, uppity London where every man imagined he was as good as the next...but Cape Town, say, or even Bombay or New Delhi where social order had not been torn down wholesale and you knew where the tiers were, and more to the point, so did other people. (106)

Her husband resents the new working relationship – 'God knows why, [...] why we insist on carrying the white mans [sic] burden' (174) – but admits that he is attracted by what Mackendrick terms 'the filthy lucre' (174).

In contrast, Helen stands for a new and more respectful type of expatriate, having distanced herself from British society and 'the old blood [which] still flowed, injected with pickling fluid by memsahibs like Millie' (124). Helen no longer wishes to be 'the No. 1 memsahib' (81) and 'bear the memsahib's load' (81), and to Bashiam, she is different indeed from the new breed of Western tourists and expatriates, 'whose outlook barred them from allowing their interests to be sparked by anything' (81) or 'those others, the recorders, the authors and researchers who alarmed him by taking down everything he said for use in the books they were going to write' (81). Thus, even though Markandaya is less explicit in her criticism of Western visitors than Han, there is a similar dismissive narratorial attitude towards the Western visitor, keen on 'discovering' the East.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered the case for reading *The Coffer Dams* as an exemplar of the political middlebrow novel. Like the women writers studied thus far, Markandaya uses the dialogic possibilities of the novel to conduct a debate on the politics and economics of dam building, and the discourse of development more generally, including its stance on economic growth, the role of technology and its problematisation of the poor. Furthermore, she embeds her political theme within a plot-driven narrative, including an element of suspense, even though she does not provide the clear-cut or optimistic closure her metropolitan readers may have expected.

*The Coffey Dams* also displays an awareness of the ecological impact of large infrastructure works. Yet, in common with Han, Markandaya does not wholly reject the case for large dam projects, and their respective narratives include an element of ambivalence, which neither author fully resolves. Reading the Part II novels side by side also illustrates the ability of the middlebrow novel to tap into the contemporary public fascination with the large post-war infrastructure projects of the decolonising world, dams in particular. As seen in the two chapters, these ‘temples of modernity’ are equally captivating to Han’s and Markandaya’s fictional protagonists. However, both authors endow the dams with a diverse set of contradictory meanings – as a marker of national independence and index of modernity; as a reminder of the legacy of imperial violence; and as a symbol of the uneven development in neocolonial regimes – registering emerging concerns about their socio-economic and environmental costs.<sup>79</sup>

A somewhat neglected novel in end-of-empire scholarship, *The Coffey Dams*’ literary-historical interest does not only stem from its discussion of the economic legacy of empire, but also from its depiction of a small expatriate community, struggling to find its place in independent India. Here middlebrow class concerns intersect with postcolonial criticism of residual imperial attitudes, reminiscent of McMinnies’s irreverent commentary on late colonial Malaya. In *The Coffey Dams*, the tropes of the domestic highlight the limitations of the Western post-imperial mindset and contribute to the critical portrayal of the modern expert and tourist, thereby echoing Han’s treatment of Western visitors to the Himalayan region.

Finally, the chapter reflects on the postcolonial author’s advocacy role on behalf of the environmental refugees, considering both form and reception. Close reading reveals the limitations of Markandaya’s imaginative engagement with the invisible victims of large infrastructure projects. Contemporary reviewers did not seem troubled by the novel’s main message – dam building is acknowledged to be a conflictual issue – and Markandaya appears to have struck the right balance between criticising the British endeavour and presenting the broader politics of dam building, at least for the featured newspaper reviewers. More striking though is that the powerful descriptions of the dam’s ecological impact did not feature in the 1969 reviews. The political middlebrow, it appears, needs to wear its politics lightly.

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<sup>79</sup> Recent critical work explores the multiple representations of modern urban infrastructure. For example, Alex Tickell and Ruvani Ranasinha, ‘Delhi: New Writings on the Megacity’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54:3 (2018), 297-306; Alex Tickell, ‘Writing the City and Indian English Fiction: Planning, Violence, and Aesthetics’, in *Planned Violence: Post/Colonial Urban Infrastructure, Literature and Culture*, ed. by Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 195-211. On the representation of infrastructure in relation to the imperial ideology, see Dominic Davies, *Imperial Infrastructure and Spatial Resistance in Colonial Literature, 1880-1930* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017).

### **PART III: DECOLONISATION AND DOMESTIC POLITICS**

Part III turns to the domestic consequences of decolonisation and asks how the female middlebrow novel narrates public anxieties about Britain's post-imperial status, focusing on the interrelated themes of decolonisation, immigration and metropolitan disorder. Continuing my exploration of the politics and economics of decolonisation into the 1960s, the analysis also takes in concerns about urbanisation and frustrations with the unfulfilled promises of the welfare state. Intriguingly, the two novels discussed in this Part overlap in their title formulation, and their central protagonist's 'nowhere' status invites a discussion of the middlebrow's ability to deal with the traumas of empire, diaspora and exile. As in Parts I and II, contemporary reviews help shed light on the reception of the novel of decolonisation, and the resonance of the female political middlebrow novel more generally.

#### **CHAPTER 6: DECOLONISATION AND METROPOLITAN DISORDER: ELSPETH HUXLEY, *A MAN FROM NOWHERE* (1964)**

##### **Introduction**

When Elspeth Huxley started work on *A Man from Nowhere*, final preparations were underway for Kenya's independence, formally declared in December 1963.<sup>1</sup> Matters had progressed rapidly since the defeat of Mau Mau and the end of the Emergency in November 1959. Formal negotiations started in January 1960 at the first Lancaster House conference, with the British government agreeing to a blueprint for Kenya's political future based on majority rule. Kenya's white settlers had limited influence during the negotiations. They were able to sell their lands under a government-sponsored scheme but given no further concessions, and many were angry at the loss of their lands and what they perceived as the efforts of a lifetime. It is this anger – and the uncertain future many settlers faced – that drives Huxley's novel.

Set in the Home Counties in the early 1960s, *A Man from Nowhere* recounts the quest for revenge by former settler Dick Heron, who has lost his wife and brother during an unnamed insurgency, which can easily be identified as the Mau Mau rebellion. Heron holds the Colonial Secretary Peter Buckle responsible for his losses and seeks employment on Buckle's farm, waiting for an opportunity to kill his opponent. Heron becomes embroiled in Buckle's complicated family dynamics, as he embarks on a relationship with his daughter Julia and is blackmailed by his son Martin, a fashionable art dealer in London's Soho, who is involved in forgery. Meanwhile, in the village of Larkinglass, Heron is suspected of being a Soviet spy. The novel ends not with the expected

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<sup>1</sup> Elspeth Huxley, *A Man from Nowhere* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964). All references will be to this edition and will be inserted parenthetically into the text.

revenge act, but with a fatal car collision caused by Julia, the discovery of Martin's forgeries and Heron's suicide.

*A Man from Nowhere* was first published by Chatto & Windus in June 1964, with a US print appearing in September 1965 and a UK paperback in October 1967.<sup>2</sup> It did not enjoy the commercial success of Huxley's earlier novels, *A Thing to Love* (1954) and *The Red Rock Wilderness* (1957), which had both been Book Society Recommendations, but was nevertheless widely reviewed in the British press.<sup>3</sup> According to Christine Nicholls, Huxley wanted to provide a commentary on English life and 'its present self-deceptions,' as seen by an outsider.<sup>4</sup> This was also the perspective her publishers were keen to promote, with the blurb for the first edition stating: 'Known for her perceptive writings on Africa, here she examines in a segment of England, the contradictions, compromises and self-deceiving formalities of a society at once ageless and evolving, corrupt and indestructible.' Yet despite its rural setting and commentary on domestic politics – Buckle blames his party's by-election loss on 'trouble in the Middle East and the cost of living index up again and unemployment' (241) – the politics of decolonisation feature prominently in the narrative. For Heron, decolonisation represents the loss of 'all that you'd built up and worked for, your hopes for the future, your schemes and plans, your capital – the wind of change would scatter these like thistledown' (204). For Buckle, a swift hand over of power is essential: 'We could fight those people, go on fighting them, as we tried in Cyprus and the French did in Algeria. And look at the result' (288). For the villagers, Africa is a distant and confusing place, and they puzzle over Heron's provenance as 'he didn't belong and yet he must belong to something, somewhere' (18).

*A Man from Nowhere* has received limited scholarly attention. Lassner briefly discusses the novel alongside *A Thing to Love* and concludes that it represents the 'depressed self-destructiveness of colonial Africa' and 'enacts a mourning process that can only end with profound melancholy.'<sup>5</sup> Lassner is primarily concerned with Heron's failed attempt at killing the person he holds responsible for his losses and concludes that the settler has become the ultimate outsider.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Nicholls remarks that a 'feeling of futility and retreat pervades the book, of fruitless venture, worthless effort.'<sup>7</sup> Sharon Russell's equally concise discussion focuses on the tension between African and English values, locating the origin for the revenge quest in Africa, and its abandonment in England.<sup>8</sup> In her view, the novel lacks a resolution, as Heron's suicide prevents the reader from understanding the

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<sup>2</sup> Cross and Perkin, p. 72

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 45; p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholls, p. 345.

<sup>5</sup> Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, p. 158.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholls, p. 346.

<sup>8</sup> Sharon A. Russell, 'Elsbeth Huxley's Africa: Mystery and Memory', in: *Mysteries of Africa*, ed. by Eugene Schleh (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991), pp. 21-34 (p. 32).

mystery that he brought from Africa.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Elizabeth Buettner views Heron as typifying the imperial expatriate, who is ‘coming home’ to an unfamiliar metropolis.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter extends this small body of scholarship in several ways. First, I discuss the relationship between Huxley’s journalistic writing and her fiction, extending my analysis of this under-researched aspect of her work. My objective here is to highlight the ambiguity of Huxley’s polyphonic narrative, as it carries her critique of Britain’s handling of decolonisation, whilst also exposing her continued belief in the legitimacy of the settlers’ presence and their beneficial contributions to Kenya’s rural economy. I will argue too that the text rejects the notion that the rapid decolonisation of the late 1950s and early 1960s had left no mark on British culture. Instead, ‘[e]mpire persistently impinges’ on Huxley’s Home Counties community, illustrating, as Schwarz proposes, that ‘England, even at its most insular, was [n]ever quarantined from the imperatives of empire.’<sup>11</sup>

John MacKenzie suggests that despite the humiliation of Suez, British culture continued to underwrite an illusion of imperial power into the late 1950s.<sup>12</sup> But this illusion was shattered in the early 1960s, when a notion of national decline took hold amongst intellectuals and in popular media, with commentators on both the left and the right opining on how the ending of empire would affect British society and Britain’s sense of national purpose.<sup>13</sup> According to Stuart Ward, British culture of this period registers anxiety, nostalgia, as well as resentment with the British establishment, centred around a deep sense of loss.<sup>14</sup> Literature of the late fifties and early sixties also captures emerging domestic tensions, exemplified by the so-called Angry Young Men (the novelists John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, and, more controversially, Kingsley Amis and John Wain, and the playwright John Osborne) and The Movement (an earlier grouping of poets and novelists, including Amis, Wain and Philip Larkin).<sup>15</sup> Sharing a lower-middle class or upper-working class background, a university (and often grammar school) education and an anti-modernist aesthetic stance, their work critiques Britain’s rigid class-based values, even though as Nick Bentley and John Brannigan argue, they ultimately endorse the post-war conservative consensus.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Russell, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Buettner, ‘“We Don’t Grow Coffee and Bananas in Clapham Junction You Know!”: Imperial Britons Back Home’, in: *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons over the Seas*, ed. by Robert Bickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 302-28 (pp. 303-05).

<sup>11</sup> Schwarz, ‘Introduction’, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> John M. MacKenzie, ‘The Persistence of Empire in Metropolitan Culture’, in *British Culture and the End of Empire*, ed. by Stuart Ward (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 21-36 (p. 32).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33. See also Whittle, pp. 179-81.

<sup>14</sup> Ward, ‘Introduction’, pp. 8-11.

<sup>15</sup> Bentley, pp. 127-33; John Brannigan, *Literature, Culture and Society in Postwar England: 1945-1965* (Amazon Printing, no date) [2002], pp. 33-35; Zachary Leader, ‘Movement Fiction and Englishness’, in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 7: British and Irish Fiction since 1940*, ed. by Peter Boxall and Bryan Cheyette (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 127-45.

<sup>16</sup> Bentley, p. 129; Brannigan, p. 34.

Locating *A Man from Nowhere* within the cultural landscape of mid-1960s Britain, my second objective is to explore how the text deals with various domestic tensions. Recalling Fanon's description of decolonisation as a 'programme of complete disorder,' Schwarz has argued that this notion of disorder can be applied not only to the overthrow of the racial hierarchy of empire, but equally to the perceived threat to the values of the home nation.<sup>17</sup> Although the discourse of disorder is usually associated with a younger generation, I will argue that Huxley's novel captures some of their concerns, including a resentment with the British establishment and an (albeit brief) interrogation of the values supporting Britain's class structure.

Huxley situates the origin for the novel's crime in the empire, even though its tragic conclusion takes place in the relative quietness of the Home Counties. Like Huxley, prominent post-war middlebrow crime writers, such as Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh and Josephine Tey routinely chose country settings for their crime narratives.<sup>18</sup> Their fictional crimes disturb previously cohesive communities and while working within a narrative form which demands resolution and moral restoration, their novels reflect a sense of loss and a pessimistic belief that Britain has changed forever.<sup>19</sup> Frequently, these novels also contain imperial traces, even when empire is not discussed as such.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, although female middlebrow crime fiction is often described as a conservative genre, some scholars points to its ability to capture post-war tensions between modernity and conservatism, between competing notions of class and gender identity, and of the legacy of empire.<sup>21</sup> Building on this scholarship, my third objective is to uncover *A Man from Nowhere*'s affinities with female middlebrow crime writing, and specifically Huxley's use of the genre's conventions (plot, suspense and resolution) to foreground anxieties about Britain's post-imperial future.

In chapter 2, I argued that the sensationalist imagery and tropes of horror and the exotic in *A Thing to Love* co-exist uneasily with the novel's dialogism and weaken its documentary quality. But whereas in *A Thing to Love*, horror and the exotic serve to convey the violence experienced by the coloniser, in *A Man from Nowhere*, colonial violence seeps into the fabric of British society, thus fundamentally altering the reader's experience of colonial violence. Huxley's 1954 reviewers had no qualms with the novel's claim to authenticity – no doubt conditioned by equally sensationalist media

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<sup>17</sup> Fanon, p. 27; Schwarz, 'Introduction', p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Linden Peach, "'Criminal Desires': Women Writing Crime 1945-1960", in *Women's Writing, 1945-1960: After the Deluge*, ed. by Jane Dowson (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 38-52 (p. 39); Cora Kaplan, 'Josephine Tey and her Descendants: Conservative Modernity and the Female Crime Novel', in *End of Empire and the English Novel since 1945*, ed. by Rachael Gilmour and Bill Schwarz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 53-73 (pp. 53-54).

<sup>19</sup> Peach, pp. 38-39; Kaplan, 'Josephine Tey', p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54; p. 71.

<sup>21</sup> Peach, pp. 38-39; Kaplan, 'Josephine Tey', pp. 53-54; Melissa Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction: The Female Gentleman* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 13-14; pp. 20-22; Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 70.

coverage of the Mau Mau insurgency – but objected to aspects of its plot. Ten years later, the changed political landscape may have altered readers’ responses to her novel’s political discourse and its literary treatment of the underlying anxieties of a nation concerned with moral order and the ‘[f]orces of corruption’ which, as Schwarz remarks, ‘had previously been *over there* [but] now appeared to be rampant *over here*.’<sup>22</sup>

### ***A Man from Nowhere and The Wind of Change***

When Prime Minister Harold Macmillan declared in February 1960 ‘[w]e have seen the awakening of national consciousness of peoples who have for centuries lived in dependence upon some other power,’ he was signalling a major shift in official thinking about the pace of decolonisation.<sup>23</sup>

Macmillan’s acknowledgement – ‘The wind of change is blowing through this continent, and, whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact’ – was prompted by the recognition that Africa’s growing nationalism required a more rapid devolution of power.<sup>24</sup> But it also reflected the realisation that Britain no longer had the military or economic means to stem widespread insurrection and violence, which in any case could no longer be dismissed as minor local unrest or (as in the case of Kenya) a return to barbarism.<sup>25</sup>

Macmillan remained committed to maintaining a global role for Britain, alongside the United States and the Soviet Union, with the Commonwealth serving as a platform to preserve British influence in its former Asian and African colonies.<sup>26</sup> Yet, Britain’s global standing had been irrevocably damaged by the 1956 Suez crisis, exposing its position as subordinate partner to the United States, but also revealing divisions within the Commonwealth.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, decolonisation had become intrinsically linked to Cold War dynamics and as Macmillan remarked:

the great issue in this second half of the twentieth century is whether the uncommitted peoples of Asia and Africa will swing to the East or to the West. Will they be drawn into the Communist camp? Or will the great experiments in self-government that are now being made in Asia and Africa, especially within the Commonwealth, prove so successful, and by their example so compelling, that the balance will come down in favour of freedom and order and justice?<sup>28</sup>

Macmillan and his new Colonial Secretary Iain Macleod were keen too to avoid the mistakes made by the Belgian and French governments in Congo and Algeria, and as they sought to build relationships with cooperative African politicians, they did not want to be seen to be privileging white settler

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<sup>22</sup> Schwarz, ‘Introduction’, p. 11. Italics in original.

<sup>23</sup> Harold Macmillan, *Pointing the Way: 1959-1961* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 475.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, pp. 247-49; Sarah Stockwell and L.J. Butler, ‘Introduction’, in *The Wind of Change: Harold Macmillan and British Decolonization*, ed. by L. J. Butler and Sarah Stockwell, (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1-19 (pp. 6-7).

<sup>26</sup> Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 227; Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 364; Hyam, pp. 310-12.

<sup>27</sup> Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 228; Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, pp. 361-63; Hyam, p. 310.

<sup>28</sup> Macmillan, p. 476.



minorities.<sup>29</sup> In the case of Kenya, this meant agreeing to majority African rule, which London had previously resisted, even as this infuriated the settlers.

The change of British policy in Africa also responded to a shift in public opinion at home. By 1959, voters had become more sensitive to the use of military force and sympathy for the settlers' predicament was dwindling rapidly.<sup>30</sup> As shown by Joanna Lewis, British newspapers now promoted the idea that it was time to drop the colonial burden and support the Commonwealth instead.<sup>31</sup> After the revelation of the Hola camp massacre in early 1959, where eleven Mau Mau detainees had been tortured and left to die, support for the colonial government all but vanished.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout this period, Huxley continued to write for *Time and Tide*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. In early 1960, she participated in the Monckton Commission, tasked with examining the future of the Federation of Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Her experience on the committee inspired the detective novel *The Merry Hippo* (1963). In January 1963, she flew to Kenya, to visit her mother Nellie Grant, who had started preparations for selling her farm and moving to Portugal, and to gather material for her writing. As during previous visits, Huxley travelled widely and met with leading politicians, including Kenya's future prime minister Jomo Kenyatta and the British Governor Malcolm MacDonald.<sup>33</sup> The significant changes which had taken place since her last visit in 1960 were recorded in *Forks and Hope*, a collection of essays published in February 1964, and would also inform her novel.

### **Elspeth Huxley and decolonisation in the 1960s**

Huxley's journalistic writing during this period captures her frustration with the shape and pace of decolonisation in Kenya, yet is sensitive to a new public mood, more sympathetic to the nationalist struggle. At the same time, she continues to champion the cause of the settlers, even as this had ceased to be of interest to mainstream voters. She pleads for more generous support for white farmers, highlighting the achievements of the early settlers and noting their attachment to 'their land of adoption.'<sup>34</sup> Reflecting on the future of Europeans in Kenya, she questions how 'white mixed farmers

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<sup>29</sup> Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 262; Schwarz, *The White Man's World*, pp. 373-75. Macleod resigned in October 1961 and was succeeded by Reginald Maudling, who proved equally reluctant to giving in to settler demands (ibid., p. 384).

<sup>30</sup> Darwin, *The End of the British Empire*, p. 32; Stuart Ward, 'Whirlwind, Hurricane, Howling Tempest: The Wind of Change and the British World', in *The Wind of Change: Harold Macmillan and British Decolonization*, ed. by L. J. Butler and Sarah Stockwell (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 48-69 (p. 50, p. 52).

<sup>31</sup> Lewis, 'Daddy', p. 245.

<sup>32</sup> Historians view Hola as the moral end of the British Empire in Africa (Hyam, p. 263). See also Anderson, *Histories*, pp. 326-30; Stockwell and Butler, pp. 6-7.

<sup>33</sup> Nicholls, pp. 341-42.

<sup>34</sup> 'The White Africans', *Listener*, 6 November 1962, pp. 342-43.

can survive in an all-black, land-hungry ocean.<sup>35</sup> She also accuses the British government of wanting ‘to pull out as quickly as possible before anything explodes in their face.’<sup>36</sup>

Huxley is not impressed with the opposition’s stance either. Commenting on the forthcoming general election, in August 1959 she criticises Labour for turning colonial politics into a major election issue and for presenting Tory policy as reactionary and oppressive, noting that the previous Labour government had been pursuing very similar policies in Africa.<sup>37</sup> She remarks that Hola would have happened too if Labour had been in government, and that Ghana and Nigeria reached independence under a Tory government.<sup>38</sup> The real issue, she argues, is to guarantee safeguards for European and Asian minorities in East and Central Africa, to avoid ‘being swamped by an enfranchised flood of Africans quite without experience of administration.’<sup>39</sup>

While genuinely interested in Kenya’s future as an independent nation, she is concerned that its political leaders are unable to ‘transcend the deep-seated factionalism based on race and tribe,’ adding that ‘*Uhuru* [freedom] could peter out like a clogged river in a welter of distrust.’<sup>40</sup> She worries too about the lack of capable administrators to take over from the British and deplores the limited political awareness of Kenya’s newly enfranchised masses: ‘a population still predominantly illiterate and deeply fissured by tribalism, its women used as beasts of burden, its economy based largely on hoe and goat.’<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, her portraits of Kenyatta and fellow African leaders are indicative of a residual imperialist discourse. Describing Kenyatta as belonging to ‘the dark, tribal past of Africa,’ she believes him to be an obstacle to the unity Kenya needs if it wants a stable political future and avoid the disintegration witnessed in Congo.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, she is dismissive of Pan-Africanism, and in particular its ambition to become ‘a great bloc of united forward-looking peoples who will be listened to with respect in Moscow, Peking, New York and London.’<sup>43</sup> She further holds some of the leading African nationalists responsible for embracing an anti-Western rhetoric, adding that they are being supported by China and the Soviet Union.<sup>44</sup> The communists, she warns, are playing the long game, and ‘non-alignment, the new doctrine of the independent states,

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Kenya’s Clouded Future: Can the Europeans Survive?’, *Daily Telegraph*, 1 March 1963, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Kenya Today: The Threat of Tribalism’, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 April 1963, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> ‘The Issue in Africa’, *Time and Tide*, 1 August 1959, p. 820.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> ‘Kenya’s Clouded Future’, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Picking Kenya to Pieces’, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 April 1963, p. 14. Huxley’s view on the lack of preparation is not dissimilar to Macleod’s, who later admitted that insufficient effort had gone into training African officials. See Robert Shepherd, *Iain Macleod* (London: Hutchinson, 1994), pp. 162-63.

<sup>42</sup> Elspeth Huxley, ‘The Next-to-Last Act in Africa’, *Foreign Affairs*, 39:4 (1961), 655-69 (pp. 657-58).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 665. Huxley appears uninterested in the solidarities forged in the aftermath of Bandung. At best, Pan-Africanism is seen as a means to counter the effects of the balkanization of Africa as former colonial empires are being dismantled; at worst it is the instrument used to ‘expel the White race from the whole of Africa’ (*ibid.*).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 665-66.

suits them very well.’<sup>45</sup> Huxley concludes that Africa has become a Cold War battlefield, requiring a more unified Western response, as well as a more cooperative stance from America.<sup>46</sup>

The loss of productive white settler farms is another recurrent topic. Her starting position is that the African land was vacant – ‘almost empty of humans, whatever African politicians may subsequently have claimed’ – and that European settlers brought superior farming methods:<sup>47</sup>

So most of the first settlers made their farms from uninhabited and untouched bush and forest. They felled trees, uprooted stumps, fenced paddocks; they made dams, dug wells, sank boreholes; experimented with crops that failed, imported animals that died, died themselves sometimes of mysterious diseases until the newcomers had found out what would, or wouldn’t, thrive, and how to live and make a living in this strange land where snow lay on the equator. By and large they succeeded.<sup>48</sup>

European farms, she explains, are responsible for four fifths of the country’s exports and most of its taxable revenues.<sup>49</sup> In their place, small-scale holdings have arisen, barely able to support a single family and no longer producing for export. These also contribute to the destruction of the landscape: ‘Down come all the trees – fine native cedars kept to preserve river-banks from erosion, young plantations to supply fencing posts. Up go little shacks built in a week from mud and poles, partitioned into two by sacking.’<sup>50</sup> She further laments the loss of equipment and skills:

Away go tractors, ploughs, drills, sprayers, all the modern machinery; off to auction go the pedigree and high-yielding cattle and pigs; [...] weeds choke the once-bright gardens, ponds vanish in a tangle of undergrowth, goats explore the lawns. Hand-hoes peck away at rich grass leys and stubble, and soon irregular little plots of cultivation appear. The clock’s hands go back 50 years.<sup>51</sup>

Contrasting the small scale of the units, tended by Kikuyu women, with the trend elsewhere towards mechanisation, mass-production and centralised marketing, Huxley doubts whether the settlement schemes will satisfy land hunger.<sup>52</sup> Instead, she asserts that the government-led schemes will lead to fragmentation and deterioration of the land, and depress economic growth, unless accompanied by efforts to tackle soil deterioration, train people and control population growth.<sup>53</sup> With some bitterness, she notes that some of the schemes are being financed by British tax payers and go against the advice of the World Bank.<sup>54</sup> She is, however, committed to identifying sustainable solutions for the future,

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 666.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 667-68.

<sup>47</sup> Elspeth Huxley, *Forks and Hope: An African Notebook* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), p. 81.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Kenya Today: Back to Peasant Farming’, *Daily Telegraph*, 18 April 1963, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.; Huxley, *Forks*, pp. 79-80; ‘Land Hunger in Kenya: Small Plots Cannot Provide a Living’, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 1963, p. 14.

<sup>53</sup> Huxley, *Forks*, pp. 81-83; ‘Land Hunger’, p. 14. See also ‘Land in Kenya’, *Time and Tide*, 30 April 1955, pp. 554-55.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Land Hunger’, p. 14; ‘Breach of Contract: Britain’s Duty to the Kenya Farmers’, *Daily Telegraph*, 30 August 1963, p. 10.

believing that investment in local projects, together with land reform will create a local middle class, and in turn make self-rule a possibility:

A man with a stake in the country, with a prosperous small farm and crops that need stable world markets [...] may think twice about upsetting everything by going to extremes. [...] If we run our farms well, he will say, and make a success of our co-operative, we can run our country too.<sup>55</sup>

Despite her racist language and her personal dislike of Kenyatta, Huxley's articles are of historical interest as they feature representatives from the various political parties and tribes, farmers and small business owners. As such, she recognises their collective claims on 'the fruits of *Uhuru*,' even though she never ceases to believe in the legitimacy of the 'White Africans.'<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, her interest in the deterioration of the land and the environmental impact of colonialism anticipates later ecocriticism. There are gaps too in her writing, and she stays silent on Kenyatta's encouragement of foreign investment and the resulting economic distortions, such as the outflow of foreign profits and persistent income inequality, characteristics of neocolonialism's uneven development, discussed in Part II.<sup>57</sup>

As noted in chapter 2, Huxley's reporting is frequently contradictory, and her writing style is inconsistent too. Within the context of a single piece, she veers between evidence-based reporting (with precise statistics, such as on the cost of the various resettlement schemes or agricultural yields) and lyrical descriptions of the African landscape. Using factual case studies, she describes the successes and failures of small-scale projects across the country. She relays conversations with people from a wide range of backgrounds and does not refrain from reporting points of view that are not her own, yet often employs emotional and racist terms. Nonetheless, her trademark style – lively sketches of Nairobi and the White Highlands, vivid descriptions of encounters with European settlers, African politicians and local administrators, together with personal judgements and predictions – is well suited to bring the politics and economics of decolonisation to life. In the next section, I explore how the polemics of Huxley's media reports are transported to the imaginary setting of the novel.

### ***A Man from Nowhere* and colonial politics**

In *A Man from Nowhere*, empire is debated from afar, in familiar English settings (such as the local pub and Buckle's estate), and involves those with direct experience of decolonisation, as well as the village onlookers who voice a general dissatisfaction with their government's policies. In the first instance, Heron reflects bitterly on the settlers' treatment at the hands of the British government:

'Who made us into beggars? I suppose something called the wind of change' (203). In extended and

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<sup>55</sup> 'Time Runs out in Africa 3: Transformation Scene in Kenya', *Sunday Times*, 17 May 1959, p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> 'The White Africans', pp. 342-43.

<sup>57</sup> Colin Leys, *Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism, 1964-1971* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), p. 255; Poppy Cullen, *Kenya and Britain after Independence: Beyond Neo-Colonialism* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), pp. 7-10.

recurrent flashbacks, he recalls his and his wife's anguish at selling up, the detail echoing Huxley's reporting on the subject of Kenyan resettlement:

You couldn't get more than a fraction of their value for the cattle, the pedigree lines you'd worked so hard to establish would be broken and dispersed; farm machinery fetched a song and the land – if you were lucky someone would mine it for a few years, paying a nominal rent, otherwise squatters would move in with their hoes and scrub cattle and very quickly bleed it to death. (204)

Distracted by his grief, Heron is unable to subscribe to a future which no longer features the independent white settler, thus echoing the sentiments of some of Huxley's settler interviewees.

Heron also accuses the government of accommodating the erstwhile leader of the insurgency:

But they'd never got the planner of it all. [...] They knew who he was: and so did the authorities, they put a price on his head and pronounced him an outcast unfit until his dying day to mix with decent men. And then they pardoned him and called him in to treat with him, and now he was a slimy statesman fawned upon by Cabinet Ministers and wined and dined by business men [sic] wanting contracts and reporters wanting interviews and delegates to the United Nations wanting votes and diplomats from Iron Curtain countries wanting to destroy the sordid remnants of British influence. A statesman acclaimed in foreign capitals, given V.I.P. treatment at London's most expensive hotels. (277)<sup>58</sup>

Heron's views are in direct contrast with Buckle's, who represents the official policies of Macmillan and Macleod. Buckle is shown to be a pragmatist, keen to bring an end to the violence – 'at long last we'd signed the agreement ending the futile bloodshed and putting responsibility squarely on the nationalists to get down to governing the country' (139) – and prioritises Britain's future relationships with its former colonies over the settlers' interests.<sup>59</sup> Returning from a colonial conference, Buckle reflects smugly: 'It was not quite clear what had been settled, except another interest-free loan, but there'd been an agreed communiqué and, despite a lot of sabre-rattling, no one had left the Commonwealth' (124).

Held personally responsible by Heron for his loss, Buckle is unapologetic about Britain's role in the process of decolonisation:

They happen everywhere – bloodshed, violence, revolution – it's a blood-soaked age. Can't you see we were trying to avoid that sort of thing? [...] And how long do you think our people here would have stood for it? Our other alternative, the one we chose, was to come to terms. We had to do that in the end, so we did it before the bloodshed and the bitterness instead of after. (288)

Paraphrasing Macmillan's rhetoric, Buckle concludes: 'No man on earth can stop these great waves of history from sweeping away good and bad together. [...] It's right, you know it's right, that people should be free!' (290-91). And in a direct reference to Macmillan's speech, Buckle asserts: 'I didn't

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<sup>58</sup> Nicholls mentions that Huxley was careful not to insinuate that Kenyatta had been a murderer, and on advice from her publisher, made a few alterations to her characterisation (p. 345).

<sup>59</sup> The view that accelerating independence was critical to avoid bloodshed was a key plank of Macleod's approach. Shepherd, *Iain Macleod*, p. 162; p. 254.

create the trend of history, the Afro-Asian dynamic, the wind of change, any more than you did' (286). Countering the former settler's accusation, he defends his and his government's stance:

I've not been carrying out a policy I don't believe in, cynically, jumping on the nationalist bandwagon as you think I have. I've been doing what I honestly believe's right, I know's right, right for the people themselves and for my own people, my country, the peace of the world – even right for you and others like you in the end. (291)

There is a hint though that the younger generation is more sceptical, as suggested by Martin's dismissive remark: 'he only thinks of the Commonwealth's appointment with destiny in the dawn of a new golden age. That was last week's happy phrase' (84).

Huxley further uses the dialogue between Heron and Buckle to criticise the government's resettlement plans, a recurrent topic in her non-fictional writing. Employing detail from the earlier media reports, her protagonist expresses his bitterness at the loss of his land:

First you imagined it and then you worked for it, finally you built it and it's yours. So naturally, you don't see why you should hand it over to someone else who's never worked for it at all and would wipe it off the map in a couple of years.

[...]

it was just forest and no one there, just trees and emptiness. All that's gone now. [...] Instead, there's crops and fences and boreholes, paddocks and leys and barns and dips and the pedigree cattle. Now it's their turn, they'll go too. [...] on my place in five years time there won't be anything left of what we created. (285)

Heron repeats the settlers' – and Huxley's – view that the land was theirs, emphasising not only the settlers' belief in their superior agricultural management, but also equating productive use of 'vacant' colonial territory with social and moral order.<sup>60</sup> Here, Huxley employs a familiar argument which justified colonial occupation: building villages, fencing and clearing the land were seen as superior activities to the more itinerant lifestyles of native inhabitants, allowing newly arrived settlers to argue that the latter did not have a bond with the land and consequently could not claim ownership.<sup>61</sup> It is worth noting that the actual labourers, Heron's African farm hands, have no voice in this debate.

Huxley employs the voices of her central protagonists to express two views on the politics of decolonisation: the government's belief that granting full independence earlier than anticipated was the better course of action, and the settlers' sense of betrayal and their anger at Macleod, sentiments which were also held in the right wing of the Conservative party.<sup>62</sup> Although Huxley clearly stated her personal views in her journalistic writings, here she is more ambivalent. Heron's and Buckle's respective causes – the former's individual loss and the latter's mission to limit further collective

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<sup>60</sup> Heron's exposition is reminiscent of Said's characterisation of the colonial plantation as helping to establish social order and moral priorities at home (Said, *Culture*, p. 73).

<sup>61</sup> David Day, *Conquest: How Societies Overwhelm Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 161-63.

<sup>62</sup> Schwarz, *The White Man's World*, p. 376; pp. 388-89; Stockwell and Butler, pp. 6-7.

losses – are given equal weight. As we shall see later, the novel’s ending offers a less ambiguous moral hierarchy of viewpoints, tilting the novel’s discourse in favour of Heron.

Additionally, she uses the Larkinglass characters to convey the belief that official policies were not in the country’s best interest. For the bailiff Mr Tompkins, colonial politics is synonymous with accommodating corruption, as he dismissively refers to his boss, ‘away on one of his African jaunts, shaking another independent country out of the blanket or handing more taxpayers’ money to keep sweet the fat black politicians with their posh fin-tailed cars and golden beds and armed bodyguards’ (72). Mrs Harris, Heron’s landlady and owner of the village store, is not impressed either with Buckle: ‘Always gallivanting about, one country or another, giving the blacks their freedom or whatever it is. And giving them our money. Who pays? That’s what I always say. It’s us who pay in the end’ (12). Mrs Harris has not bought into the new world order either:

Colonials were English and yet they weren’t. They were loyal to the Queen and fought for England when needed, for which they got little thanks. [...] they were not colonials now, they had turned into something else – the Commonwealth. But the Commonwealth had mainly black man [sic], black and brown, who didn’t feel the same way, naturally. It was all too confusing. (21)

For the village locals, the former empire is both a distant and unknown place – ‘Africa? They’m a lot of savages out there, that’s what it is. Savages’ (126) – and a drain on British taxpayers. Clearly, the village community is not immune from the politics of decolonisation, as its various members have a notion that their lives are impacted, thereby exemplifying Ward’s observation that ‘the stresses and strains of imperial decline were not safely contained within the realm of high politics.’<sup>63</sup>

### **Domestic politics and the threat from within**

Empire preoccupies the villagers of Larkinglass, but they hold strong views too on domestic politics and are not overly impressed with their local politician: ‘he can talk about his affluent society and way of life and all that crap’ (35). In this section, I consider to what extent Huxley’s fictional community embodies a more general sense of national decline, exacerbated by tensions between generations and across social classes, further underlining the political dimensions of the middlebrow novel.

Class tensions are never far below the surface when the villagers meet in the Red Lion pub. The farm workers nostalgically remember the days when Colonel Milton managed the Buckle estate with a large retinue of staff – ‘Chaffins had shone with glory then, and even though the gardeners had drawn no more than fifteen shilling’ (25). Yet, they are dismissive of Buckle’s farming efforts – ‘[b]loody play-acting’ (26) – and display a silent hostility when Julia enters the pub: ‘Dick didn’t think the feeling was exactly resentment or hostility but it had a trace of that, a withdrawal’ (29), indicative of an age-old distrust: ‘there was top and bottom still, power and impotence, master and man’ (31). Meanwhile, Buckle himself represents the uneasy alliance between old money – ‘hers, they

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<sup>63</sup> Ward, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.

say, they reckon he started with nothing but a suit of clothes and a quick tongue' (10) – and a new class of home owners, connected to London by the fast service and 'Rolls-Bentleys or Land Rovers' (8) and 'met on Friday evenings by slim, astringent wives or daughters in slacks, duffle coats and diamond rings' (8).

Class tensions intrude too in conversations about domestic politics. While Buckle compliments himself on his 'personal touch' (33) and the absence of 'crippling strikes, go-slows and unrest' (33) on his farm, the farmhand Bert despises his boss: 'They're all the same. Sweat the guts out of you and tell you how bloody lucky you are to afford a pint, when they're swilling champagne on the expense account' (35-36). Buckle takes a dim view of the local trade unionist Dennis Ryan – 'red-hot Labour, practically a communist' (227) – even as he refuses to extend credit to an impoverished retired colonel for his weekly milk bill. But the local villagers too distrust Ryan: 'He wasn't genuinely Irish, he'd been born in Liverpool. He wasn't English either and he didn't belong to Larkinglass, any more than most of the other council house people who worked at the components factory' (306). He was, in Mrs Harris's words, 'a red-hot socialist, little better than a Russian red' (308).

Generational clashes constitute another faultline. Mrs Harris believes the young people have it too easy: 'They're all the same, these, days, too much money when they're no more'n kids, they grow up thinking it's their right and they don't need to work for it. Not like when I was young' (11). Looking back, the older people feel a sense of injustice – '[they]'d worked so much harder than the young, for so much less' (11) – as well as regret at the loss of respect for authority: As a former police sergeant, Mr Harris had been well respected: 'no teds in those days' (9). Against the conservative values of the village, Julia and Martin Buckle and their friend Evan participate in protest marches and bomb demonstrations (49), 'taking up with intellectuals and left-wing despisers of the market place and money power' (93). Alongside the villagers, Buckle's wife Lavinia is concerned about their political views, notably Evan's work for a publication with 'a policy of disgruntled fury towards politics, avant-garde impatience towards the recognized arts, contempt for royalty, romantic idealism towards the coloured races, hatred for authority, indifference towards everything else and a small, dwindling circulation' (93). She worries too about her son Martin:

rumours of involvement in a half-world of shady clubs, of pending prosecutions that so far hadn't quite materialized for reasons that could be in themselves discreditable, [...] a whole world of which she knew nothing save the particles, by all means not all of them genuine, that had drifted into her orbit through an occasional film or television feature, a very infrequent remark Martin let drop, and, of course, all those ripples Mr Profumo's lethal brick had sent on their corrosive way. (94)<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The spy cum sex affair involving conservative MP John Profumo was viewed by many as personifying the nation's moral decline (Schwarz, 'Introduction', p. 11).



Yet it is unclear whether this younger generation will bring about lasting change. Evan is described as ‘a nice, solid suburban stockbroker at heart, the safe kind that deals in gilt-edged’ (159) and is expected to join ‘half a dozen of his father’s boards’ (160), whilst Julia finds solace in her parents’ garden, watching ‘Walter with his barrow and his grumbles – all this was normal and enduring’ (216). As such, Huxley’s characterisation dilutes the younger generation’s promise to reject the hierarchies of the past and embrace a radically different lifestyle.

Although *A Man from Nowhere* does not deal explicitly with race, it is useful to compare the villagers’ anxieties with the concerns about changing urban neighbourhoods Huxley recorded in *Back Street New Worlds*. Published in November 1964, the book was based on interviews she had conducted and published in the magazine *Punch* in early 1963. Huxley’s main aim is to explain why immigration has led to frictions. She expands on the shortage of housing, strains on schools and hospitals, as well as the cultural differences that both Britons and immigrants found difficult to comprehend. But she also attributes the anxieties of early-sixties Britain to the loss of its imperial identity, while recognising that the newly arrived immigrants have created few new problems:

they have merely underscored those which already perplex our society. In this case it is a lack of national purpose, of self-confidence, of belief; the malaise of crusaders without a cross and youth without a cause; the end of an imperial purpose that, right of wrong, sustained and magnified us in the nineteenth century, collapsed in the twentieth, and has left us in a vacuum now.<sup>65</sup>

She further comments on the lack of purpose of Britain’s youth, whilst making the case for a new community spirit: ‘a common cause to unite across dividing lines of community and race.’<sup>66</sup> Despite using what is at times questionable language, Huxley’s essays provide ample evidence of discrimination encountered by newly arrived immigrants, pointing both to real barriers (such as lack of skills and training) and those erected by prejudice:

The more successful your competitor, the more you look around for someone or something to blame. If, into the bargain, he’s an outsider, an intruder, then your xenophobia and your colour prejudice fuse. So wherever there’s competition between immigrant and native, there’s your tender spot, [...] your ‘go home nigger’ and ‘keep Britain white.’<sup>67</sup>

*A Man from Nowhere* and *Back Street New Worlds* reveal Huxley’s pre-occupation with public anxieties, some relating to the twin pressures of decolonisation and Commonwealth immigration, others the result of broader societal changes and a younger generation loudly expressing their hopes for a new societal model. In *A Man from Nowhere*, the resulting tensions are played out through the voices of the Larkinglass villagers and Buckle’s children, as nostalgia for a more hierarchical rural society is contrasted with resentment at the privileges of those who rule Britain. In *Back Street New*

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<sup>65</sup> Elspeth Huxley, *Back Street New Worlds: A Look at Immigrants in Britain* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), p. 162. For a modern critique of the work, see Wendy Webster, ‘Elspeth Huxley: Gender, Empire and Narratives of Nation, 1935-64’, *Women’s History Review*, 8 (1999), 527-45 (pp. 529-30).

<sup>66</sup> Huxley, *Back Street*, p. 162.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

*Worlds*, anger and frustration at economic inequality and lack of social opportunities are laid at the feet of poor and uneducated immigrants, whose attitudes to hard work and saving invite envy or racist commentary. What links both texts is Huxley's emphasis on the damage caused by prejudice and ignorance, exemplified by the Larkinglass view that 'our money' (12) is used to support 'savages' (126), and Huxley's British interviewees' belief that immigrants 'take our jobs' and 'our houses and turn them into slums.'<sup>68</sup> In chapter 7, I expand on this theme and explore how Markandaya fictionalises the immigrant experience.

In sum, Huxley's fictional rural community embodies the apprehensions of crisis and disorder, which according to Schwarz permeated the public mood of 1960s Britain.<sup>69</sup> Her Home Counties narrative conveys a nostalgic longing for the values of an older England, even as it exposes the inequalities supporting its class structure and registers a younger generation's desire to rally against what they consider the outdated ideas of their elders. As mentioned earlier, similar frustrations with the values and cultural institutions of 1950s and 1960s Britain animate the writings of the Movement and the Angry Young Men. However, Huxley's portrayal of Larkinglass's critical elements is hardly an endorsement of the 'great whirlwind of change' her contemporary Lessing discerns in British cultural life.<sup>70</sup> Nor does it amount to a wholesale rejection of the post-war welfare state or its optimistic belief in the classless society. Yet, her novel recognises that the perceived threat to the values of the home nation was intrinsically linked to the demise of the old colonial order. The next section considers how these themes were received by contemporary reviewers.

### **Readers and colonial politics at home**

When Huxley published *Forks and Hope*, British newspapers praised her accurate and unbiased reporting: 'she reports strictly on the basis of what she sees and hears and completely without bias' and 'bases herself firmly on facts observed and assessed by a highly perceptive mind.'<sup>71</sup> They appeared more reserved when reviewing her novel. On the one hand, reviewers acknowledged her expert knowledge of African politics and the novel's pre-occupation with the status of the outsider in society. According to the *TLS*:

Miss Huxley has always been recognized as a writer sympathetic to the plight of the European minority, and in her new novel she cleverly pleads the outsiders' cause by choosing not Africa but rural Home Counties as her setting – a setting in which the newly arrived colonial, direct, embittered, and unsophisticated, is likely to feel more of an alien than anywhere else.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>69</sup> Schwarz, 'Introduction', p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Doris Lessing, 'The Small Personal Voice', in *Declaration*, ed. by Tom Maschler (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957), pp. 11-27 (p. 27).

<sup>71</sup> [Anon.], 'Eye on Africa', *The Times*, 6 February 1964, p. 15; William Patrick Kirkman, 'Freedom for What?', *TLS*, 13 February 1964, p. 123.

<sup>72</sup> Marigold Johnson, 'African Postscript', *TLS*, 11 June 1964, p. 505.

Likewise, the *Sunday Times* remarked that ‘Miss Huxley is a careful writer with an evident knowledge of English country life [...] and her understanding of Heron’s angry motives is backed by her African experience,’ while the *Sunday Telegraph* praised Huxley for showing us ‘a world that is almost disconcertingly vivid.’<sup>73</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* wrote that Huxley ‘subjects the English scene to the clear, penetrating scrutiny for which her African novels were so remarkable.’<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand, contemporary reviewers were alert to possible tensions between the novel’s political ambitions and documentary qualities, and her readers’ expectations regarding middlebrow fiction. For one reviewer at least, *A Man from Nowhere* failed to navigate these tensions. In his reader report for Chatto & Windus, Day-Lewis described the novel as ‘an almost total failure.’<sup>75</sup> Day-Lewis agreed that Huxley’s attempt to provide a picture of ‘contemporary life in the English countryside contrasted with Africa, [...] succeeds from the documentary and descriptive points of view.’<sup>76</sup> But this, he added, is ‘at the cost of perpetually holding up the action with descriptive passages, long segments of superfluous and not strictly relevant dialogue, chunks of characters’ thoughts, and too frequent flash-backs.’<sup>77</sup> As a result, the reader ‘itch[es] with impatience rather than tingle[s] with suspense.’<sup>78</sup> Day-Lewis further dismissed Huxley’s characters as ‘mouth-pieces of her own views on modern issues.’<sup>79</sup>

Like Day-Lewis, several reviewers had reservations about the novel’s narrative qualities. A frequent complaint is that *A Man from Nowhere* hadn’t quite come to life. The *Observer* noted: ‘Mrs Huxley has some sour points to make about the contemporary scene, but I couldn’t help feeling that the book wasn’t truly in touch with it,’ adding: ‘all passion was spent before the book got written: no one comes alive and their deaths and dooms can hardly matter.’<sup>80</sup> ‘The book never stabs us awake,’ the *Guardian* complained, ‘[t]here is too much oratory, too many inquests on what happened last, a plethora of metaphors that muffle the action, and, the local chaw-bacons apart, the dialogue is pitched in the same tone whoever utters it.’<sup>81</sup> The *Listener* was critical too, writing that Huxley ‘has been unable to resist the temptations of sheer sensationalism, even though her story is designed to be both sophisticated and psychologically accurate,’ adding that ‘she is a skilled and practised writer when invention and imagination are not the main elements in her work.’<sup>82</sup> Similarly, the *New Statesman*

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<sup>73</sup> Frederic Raphael, ‘Revenge and Romance’, *Sunday Times*, 14 June 1964, p. 39; Isabel Quigly, ‘Out for Revenge’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 14 June 1964, p. 19.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Baldick, ‘In England with a Vengeance’, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 June 1964, p. 21.

<sup>75</sup> Cecil Day-Lewis, 18 January 1963.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> John Coleman, ‘A Brooklyn Morality’, *Observer*, 14 June 1964, p. 27.

<sup>81</sup> Christopher Wordsworth, ‘Intimations of Mortality’, *Guardian*, 12 June 1964, p. 6.

<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Jennings, ‘New Fiction’, *Listener*, 18 June 1964, p. 1005.

recognised the novel's 'competence' in its portrayal of rural life, but dismissed the settler as 'mad' and his sense of betrayal barely credible.<sup>83</sup>

That she had not quite managed to meet her metropolitan readers' expectations is apparent too from the coverage of the novel's use of plot and suspense. The *Daily Telegraph* commended Huxley for achieving the 'astonishing feat of maintaining suspense and interest for some 300 pages.'<sup>84</sup> The *Sunday Times* was more qualified: 'The plot generates a deal of tension (will he, won't he?), but Buckle and his family are too much out of stock and there is a lack of unexpectedness in the development.'<sup>85</sup> The *TLS* remarked that 'Miss Huxley skilfully disguises her political theme [...] under a fast and complicated plot,' but regrets that her flashbacks of Africa, 'though evocative, delay rather than deepen the mystery.'<sup>86</sup> The *Illustrated London News* disagreed, writing that 'Mrs Huxley manages, by a magnificent tour de force, to extricate herself and her "hero" from a situation which could only, I should have thought, have ended in banality.'<sup>87</sup>

As seen too in earlier chapters, most reviewers glossed over the novel's political themes. There was a veiled critique of the government's policies in the *TLS*: 'The most interesting and moving parts [...] are those where Miss Huxley lets Heron ponder on how and why he can never belong to the country which has sacrificed his happiness for the sake of abstract political ideas.'<sup>88</sup> The *Sunday Times* drew a brief comparison with the situation in Algeria: 'The English domestic scene has been comfortably free of aggrieved *colons*. The embittered *piéd noir* never seems to make trouble here; they order [sic] these things much worse in France.'<sup>89</sup> Yet, none of the reviewers questioned Huxley's endorsement of the settlers' discourse.

Reviewers did make the connection between colonial politics and national decline. The *TLS* viewed Heron as 'an effective mouthpiece for the sterling virtues Miss Huxley feels the Old Country now lacks.'<sup>90</sup> This reviewer further remarked that 'the Enemy [is] personified in its different aspects by the members of the unhappy Buckle family,' even as she concluded that Huxley had not fully succeed in creating a 'convincing portrayal of national character.'<sup>91</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* was more positive, noting that Huxley had painted a 'cruel but faithful picture of a far from happy land.'<sup>92</sup> The *Times* reviewer was of the opinion that her pictures of contemporary rural England were 'acute and revealing,' but deemed Huxley's writing 'relentless preaching.'<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> John Fuller, 'Dwarfs by the Sea', *New Statesman*, 12 June 1964, p. 921.

<sup>84</sup> Baldick, p. 21.

<sup>85</sup> Raphael, p. 39.

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, 11 June 1964, p. 505.

<sup>87</sup> E. D. O'Brien, 'A Literary Lounger', *Illustrated London News*, 11 July 1964, p. 70.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson, 11 June 1964, p. 505.

<sup>89</sup> Raphael, p. 39. Italics in original.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Baldick, p. 21.

<sup>93</sup> [Anon.], 'New Fiction', *The Times*, 11 June 1964, p. 15.

Hence, for most reviewers, *A Man from Nowhere*'s authenticity was one of its chief merits, even though their views differed on whether Huxley had been able to meet the twin goals of entertaining and educating her readers. While appreciative of *Forks and Hope*'s political themes, reviewers clearly did not expect the politics of decolonisation to be so prominent in her novel. As noted too in earlier chapters, reviewers' principal requirement is that colonial politics are brought to life through vividly imagined plots, believable characters and lively dialogue. For the middlebrow reader, authenticity and suspense, education and pleasure, are finely balanced qualities, and Huxley appears to have fallen short of her reviewers' expectations.

### ***A Man from Nowhere* and middlebrow crime fiction**

Crime fiction derives much of its appeal from its use of suspense (the anticipation of the outcome of an uncertain plot or sequence of events), alongside the intellectual pleasure associated with resolving the crime.<sup>94</sup> A well-liked form of middlebrow reading, what separates middlebrow crime novels from their popular counterparts is their attentiveness to the middle-class reader, who expects reading pleasure, arising from immersion in an exciting plot and a perverse fascination with criminal characters, as well as engagement with topical political and social issues.<sup>95</sup> Middlebrow crime fiction, Holmes suggests, offers 'satisfyingly thrilling plots combined with thematic relevance and a "literary" attention to style, character and place.'<sup>96</sup>

*A Man from Nowhere* belongs to a subgenre which views crime through the eyes of its perpetrator and reveals his intentions early on in the narrative, producing a 'whydunnit' rather than a 'whodunnit' narrative.<sup>97</sup> Here, suspense is produced by first withholding and then gradually releasing information about Heron's background and relationship with his intended victim. Suspense is created too through extended flashbacks and a series of encounters and opportunities for Heron to fire his gun. These culminate in a lengthy climatic scene in which Heron holds a gun, while explaining his views on the settler legacy to an increasingly nervous Buckle and interrupting his own monologue on decolonisation with a number of brief and brutal exclamations evoking his past suffering: 'I collected the bits' (287); 'I cut the rope' (289); 'There were flies on her tongue' (292) – before suddenly declaring: 'I can't do it' (294).

Crime novels can depart from readers' expectations, for example, when a violent crime upsets the established order in an unforeseen manner or when the expected resolution does not materialise.<sup>98</sup> We see this at work in *A Man from Nowhere*, as the ambiguous ending dilutes the narrative tension

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<sup>94</sup> John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 2-3; pp. 74-75. See also David Glover, 'The Thriller', in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 135-54.

<sup>95</sup> Schaub, p. viii; p. 23. For the genre's middle-class origins, see for example Scaggs on Sherlock Holmes's stories (p. 25) or Light on Agatha Christie (p. 11).

<sup>96</sup> Holmes, 'The Way', p. 13.

<sup>97</sup> Scaggs, p. 112.

<sup>98</sup> Holmes, 'The Way', p. 14.

created by Heron's planned revenge act. Although Heron believes that '[o]nce a man put on a uniform he ceased to matter as an individual, [...] Buckle had killed and now his turn had come to be killed' (36), he later admits that 'Buckle hadn't murdered with his own hands' (67). But Buckle is not killed and in a reversal of conventional crime plot endings, Heron takes his own life after having shot the young girl who is left paralysed by Julia's car crash. The conflict between the two protagonists is unresolved, and it is unclear whether Heron's act is driven by his romantic idealism or a consequence of his depression.

Lassner interprets Heron's suicide as a metaphor for the exhaustion of the imperial project: There is no possibility of a new beginning for the former settler, who is 'not only nowhere, but no one.'<sup>99</sup> Consequently, Huxley's 'previous pleading on behalf of the worthiness of European settlement confront[s] its own illusions and dead end.'<sup>100</sup> While consistent with Huxley's advocacy for the settler cause, Lassner's reading overlooks the novel's broader concern with Britain's post-imperial future and its attendant uncertainties. Decolonisation is an unfinished process, and Buckle continues to entertain statesmen from the former empire in order to secure their business and political support – his most recent guest 'playing ball with us better than any of the other prime ministers' (235). Meanwhile, his family is left in limbo: Julia's and Martin's legal positions are unclear, as is the impact on Buckle's career, whilst his wife Lavinia appears on the brink of abandoning their marriage. Moreover, by associating the novel's prime architect of independence with personal and moral failure, Huxley may be steering the reader's sympathies towards the settler, who has lost his family and livelihood, thus promoting the claims made by Kenya's settlers, which feature prominently in her media reports.

At first sight, the novel's ending also appears to support its earlier critique of changing social norms and the loss of the values of an older England. Significantly, the final two chapters are dedicated to local discussions of Heron's deed, whilst those characters associated with urban modernity have disappeared from view. There is, however, a moral hesitancy in these concluding conversations, as the farm hands debate whether Heron was 'touched in the head' (304), a 'mystery man' (304) or a Russian spy (305). Yet, they also believe that '[h]e meant it for the best' (304) and regret losing a good worker. Likewise, Mrs Harris reflects that he 'put the poor mite out of her misery [...] You could say he laid down his life for that child. [...] *He* wasn't the one who crippled her, that was Julia Buckle' (308), even though she remains puzzled about Heron's motives for coming to their village.<sup>101</sup>

The pessimism implied by this hesitant moral and political conclusion is attenuated by the portrayal of the village and the English landscape as moral guardians of the old. Echoing the idyllic descriptions of the novel's opening lines – 'the shiny summer coats of cattle, corn heavy in ear [...]

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<sup>99</sup> Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, p. 158.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Italics in original.

red poppies, yellow ladies' bedstraw and the creamy meadow-sweet' (7) – the closing chapter announces the arrival of winter and its age-old rituals:

The clocks had gone back now and lights were needed in the cowsheds and the dairy towards the end of milking time. Rodney liked the first early nights of winter and tea with curtains drawn, it was snug and cosy. (298)

And although post-imperial Britain is shown as rife with tensions between generations and social classes, Huxley leaves the reader with the comforting images of a companionable farmers' tea with bread, milk and herring (300), and the orderly shelves of the village shop – soup stacked 'according to its type: tomato, green pea, oxtail, mushroom' (310).

In common with other female middlebrow writers, Huxley's crime novel captures pressing societal anxieties. Huxley endows her village characters with the values that many believed to be at risk in 1960s Britain, even as she exposes their prejudices and moral weaknesses. But where her contemporaries explore how communities respond to the disruption of established gender or class norms, Huxley employs the genre to foreground disquiet about Britain's post-imperial future. Furthermore, the centrality of the settler revenge in *A Man from Nowhere*'s narrative and its ambiguous ending suggest that the forces of corruption threatening the nation cannot easily be contained. As such, Huxley's text exemplifies the potentially disturbing effect of crime fiction when it fails to reassure the reader that society's worst fears can indeed be controlled.<sup>102</sup> In the next section, I expand on these themes and explore the role of horror, considering first, the African landscape, and second, the intrusion of the exotic into the British countryside.

### **Horror, the exotic and the legacy of empire**

As explained in the chapter 2, in imperial fiction, the exotic operates as an organising metaphor, which domesticates the foreign to make it familiar and comprehensible, thereby attempting to bring order and keep the chaos of the unknown colonial space at bay. In contrast, in Huxley's post-imperial novel, the exotic not only fails to make sense of the unfamiliar colonial environment, but it also contaminates the familiar English scene.

In the first instance, the African landscape evokes a sense of security, rendered imaginatively in Heron's extended flashbacks to his idyllic childhood and the work on his farm prior to the Emergency. Memories of the sea – 'warm, silky, blue as gentians, quiet as a drowsy cat and yet alive, as if gently breathing' (100) – and the sky – 'no love had ever been like this before, of this magnitude and certainty, a surrender as total as the earth's when the morning sun flooded the sky: a love that could never change' (130) – signify his attachment to the land and his love for his wife Rose. The

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<sup>102</sup> Victoria Stewart, *Crime Writing in Interwar Britain: Fact and Fiction in the Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 186.

African landscape is associated too with hard work and reflects Huxley's belief in the settlers' contributions to agriculture in Africa:

But if you start with just a piece of forest, say, and you take it and alter it and make it grow things it's never grown before and carry new kinds of animals, and say you've bred those too – then that's different, you're creating something that wasn't there before. It's yours in a different way. [...] You have a special feeling for something you create. (284)

Yet, the African landscape is also the source of violence and death. In common with *A Thing to Love*, the colonial and the horrific are entangled. When Heron experiences a 'sickening, overwhelming panic [...] the blade of terror slitting him from crutch to throat to leave his naked organs palpitating but alive' (14), Huxley repeats the sensationalist details associated with Mau Mau, which had also featured in her reporting. The ensuing vision unfolds in a series of horrific images:

A sheep on its back, kicking, its stomach tight as a drum; sunlight striking down a red crinkled tree-trunk; a mangled mass of feathers, blood and bits of blown-up bird spattered over rock, still warm and fluttering; the look in a bullock's eye as it dragged itself along in blazing sunlight with legs severed at the hock; a pair of arms jerking upwards in water as a head sank with a cry a river of black ants writhing across a floor. (14-15)

Hence as a trope of the exotic, the African landscape is highly unstable: at times associated with colonial violence, perpetrated both by coloniser and colonised; at other times expressing nostalgia for an ordered, mythical past imagined by the settler and Huxley herself. In a further illustration of the exotic's precarious position 'between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity,' Heron's cowrie shell, a gift from Rose and 'magically retaining the ghostly whisper of a lost sea' (114) is reimagined as 'some heathen charm' (21) by Mrs Harris, quite unlike 'the kind she'd brought back from Suffolk' (21).<sup>103</sup> But the trope breaks down when in a moment of panic – '[t]he sea-muttering gradually changed into the whine of a circular saw' (114) – this same shell is thrown out of the window into the pond and triggers one of Heron's worst nightmares, as he dreams that he 'was taken to pieces, bit by bit. Everything was unscrewed and unwound and lay there, like dismantled machinery, only red and raw: eyes, teeth, kidneys, lungs, testicles, everything, all separate, [...] Vultures hunched in corners stretched out turkey-red, filthy necks' (115).

Thus, colonial violence intrudes on the English landscape, with rural markers denoting Heron's quest for vengeance:

At a small farm by the roadside, just where lane and main road joined, a tractor had been drawn up by a saw-bench and a pile of logs and miscellaneous timber: [...] A man was hitching a belt on to the power drive and as Dick approached he picked up a log, tested it on the iron bench and pushed it towards the circular saw.

The saw bit in the wood, emitting as it did so its characteristic high, rasping whine, rising to a kind of screech as the teeth reached the centre of the log. Dick halted and threw his head back as if he'd been hit in the face and then stood stock-still, stiff all over. The high-pitched whine was like a knife cutting into his body. (276)

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<sup>103</sup> Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 13.



The location of colonial violence in the English landscape marks a departure from Huxley's 1930s crime fiction, where imagery associated with horror and the exotic is used to describe violence occurring within the confines of the colony.<sup>104</sup> Violence also dominates Huxley's depiction of the Mau Mau uprising and the threat to white settlers' livelihoods, discussed in chapter 2. In contrast, *A Man from Nowhere* presents violence as an act of both the coloniser and the colonised, recalling Fanon's conceptualisation of their antagonistic relationship. 'The settler and the native are old acquaintances,' Fanon writes, 'when their glances meet [the settler] ascertains bitterly, always on the defence "They want to take our place."' <sup>105</sup> 'The 'violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world,' he continues, 'will be claimed and taken over by the native.'<sup>106</sup>

Heron's recurrent nightmares, his self-assigned duty to seek revenge and his suicide can all be read as illustrative of the mental damage Fanon ascribes to the violence of the colonial encounter (in his case, the mental disorders suffered by Europeans in Algeria). But they also suggest a link with the treatment of violence and trauma in British wartime fiction. For example, Victoria Stewart observes that war-time crime narratives take an inward turn and are concerned more with the psychological state of the criminal and less with the act of detection.<sup>107</sup> Faced with the 'traumas and crises' of war, this fiction struggles to contain and control the 'apparently uncontrollable – violence, death.'<sup>108</sup> Stewart's observations can be applied to *A Man from Nowhere*, as Huxley's imagery is suggestive of an uncontrollable spread of violence from the colonial periphery to the metropolitan centre, which cannot be contained, even as the novel's central protagonist takes his own life.

Both African and English landscape images collide to produce a powerful expression of Heron's personal trauma, whilst at the same time capturing broader societal anxieties, thus providing a further link with domestic war-time fiction. In the first instance, the English landscape refers to Britain's own violent past, with the fog in the Welsh hills covering the remains of a World War Two plane that none of the locals can remember coming down:

Strange shapes loomed all round, whitish, enormously menacing, ghosts trapped for all eternity in positions of agony. [...] All over the crest of the mountain, bits of metal had been flung out from a great explosion. The mist clothed them with menace, now parting to reveal some bulky, nameless object, now closing in again. (207-08)

This same landscape conveys moral uncertainty – a mist that 'didn't exactly clear, it slowly and imperceptibly retreated into hedges and fields and lay about in shreds' (67). Unsettled by the seemingly idyllic picture of unchanging rural life – 'cottages and an orchard with apple trees and hen-

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<sup>104</sup> Namely: *Murder at Government House* (1937); *Murder on Safari* (1938) and *Death of an Aryan* (1939). They show African 'savagery' intruding self-contained white settler communities and subsequently being eliminated by Western detective efforts.

<sup>105</sup> Fanon, p. 28; p. 30.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>107</sup> Victoria Stewart, *Narratives of Memory: British Writing of the 1940s* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 59; p. 93.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

houses' (67) – Heron comes to doubt his mission, confronted with 'human beings who couldn't make up their minds – they didn't want to, they preferred fuzz, mist, obscurity' (67). This mission has its origin in the other landscape, with '[a] sun ten times fiercer, gold not red, a sun too bright to look at, [which] would suck up the mist and there would lie the landscape's bare, hard bones' (66). In the African landscape, all doubt 'was burnt away, all fuzziness dispelled, beasts and men were lean and predatory' (66). Like the African landscape, Heron's earlier resolution had been a 'clear-cut, irreversible decision to exact a kind of wild justice [...] true and honest as nature, uncorrupted by men. [...] part of the natural law' (67). Yet ultimately, nature fails to protect Heron from the violence of empire, its fictional representation a reminder that empire's history cannot be erased.

### **Conclusion**

*A Man from Nowhere* presents a window on the changing metropolitan attitudes that accompanied the rapid dismantling of the British Empire in the early 1960s. Drawing on Huxley's extensive journalistic work, the text is simultaneously backward looking in its nostalgia for the white settler past and its unaltered belief in their beneficial presence, and forward looking in its attempt to understand the new political reality – the 'wind of change.' Although its dialogism successfully conveys the divergent viewpoints of settlers, government officials and the public at home, the novel paints a more ambiguous picture of Macmillan's and Macleod's colonial politics than her journalism, a point overlooked by previous scholars.

Viewed within the broader end-of-empire scholarship, *A Man from Nowhere* illustrates the multi-faceted cultural response to the retreat from empire, capturing concerns with national decline and individual loss; with the impact of immigration and perceived disorder in Britain's cities and towns; with concurrent discontent with post-war domestic politics. Interestingly, it is in the rural context that the faultlines of post-imperial Britain erupt, exposing rifts between generations and classes. As we shall see in chapter 7, similar tensions manifest themselves in the urban environment when Markandaya recounts the immigrant experience.

As in her earlier novel, Huxley's violent images and the tropes of horror and the exotic operate alongside carefully researched factual material. Here, they are used to express the trauma of empire and fears of domestic disorder. But whereas in *A Thing to Love*, horror and the exotic served to convey colonial violence as experienced by the coloniser, in *A Man from Nowhere*, the imagery underscores the history of violence shared by coloniser and colonised. Furthermore, while acknowledging her status as an expert on African matters, several of Huxley's 1964 reviewers found fault with her use of the genre conventions of the crime novel. Notwithstanding the altered political context, the commentators' main interest was in the novel's formal qualities, as they articulated concerns about Huxley's ability to meet the literary expectations of her readership, much like their 1954 colleagues.

## CHAPTER 7: DECOLONISATION AND IMMIGRATION: KAMALA MARKANDAYA, *THE NOWHERE MAN* (1972)

### Introduction

By the end of 1965, Britain had departed from most of its former colonies. Two years later, in January 1968, Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced the withdrawal from Britain's military bases in the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia, signalling the end of its East of Suez commitment.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary commentators viewed the announcement as comparable to Attlee's transfer of power in India in 1947 and Macmillan's 'wind of change' speech in 1960.<sup>2</sup> Next, in March 1968, a new Commonwealth Immigrants Act introduced strict controls to stem the flow of immigrants, notably the Kenyan Asians, whose expected arrival 'was more than we could absorb,' according to Home Secretary James Callaghan.<sup>3</sup> And in April of the same year, Conservative MP Enoch Powell delivered his 'rivers of blood' speech, in which he denounced the presence of Commonwealth immigrants in British cities and towns.<sup>4</sup> Linking these events and the underlying public unease with the impact of decolonisation on metropolitan life, Markandaya's 1972 novel *The Nowhere Man* offers a timely and insightful critique of the contemporary response to immigration in Britain.<sup>5</sup> It also registers the broader societal anxieties that permeate Huxley's *A Man from Nowhere*, as well as the trauma experienced by those unsettled by the end of empire, denoted by the novels' common titular emphasis.

Set in 1968, *The Nowhere Man* recounts the experience of the elderly Indian, Srinivas, who sees his suburban street transformed from a relatively neighbourly space – 'that era before racial evil was unleashed' (60) – to one where 'BLACKS GO HOME' (209) signs appear, dead mice are dropped on the doorstep of this devout Hindu and envelopes with excrement pushed through his mailbox (272; 276). After arriving in England in the early 1930s, Srinivas raises his family at No. 5 Ashcroft Avenue, builds a modest import-export business and shares war-time duties with his neighbours. One son dies during the Blitz, another moves to Plymouth and marries an Englishwoman, keen to put distance between his new life and his parents' Indian traditions. Srinivas himself believes that he is 'becoming more English than the English' (84). As time goes by, he becomes the target of racially motivated attacks perpetrated by Fred Fletcher, his neighbours' unemployed son who blames recent immigrants for his own misfortunes. Thus starts a sequence of aggressive encounters, culminating in Fred setting fire to Srinivas's home and the deaths of both Srinivas and Fred.

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<sup>1</sup> The term refers to Britain's military operations in the Indian ocean (Hyam, p. 386).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 397.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 352.

<sup>4</sup> Powell declared: 'As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see "the River Tiber foaming with much blood."' Enoch Powell, *Speech at Birmingham*, 20 April 1968 <<https://www.enochpowell.net/speeches.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> Kamala Markandaya, *The Nowhere Man* (London: Hope Road Publishing, 2019) [1972]. Emphasis in original. All references will be to this edition and will be inserted parenthetically into the text. The American edition was published in late 1972; the English edition in early 1973.

*The Nowhere Man* is typically studied within the broader context of post-war diasporic fiction. Scholars tend to focus on the character of Srinivas, highlighting his initial desire to integrate into English society and his subsequent loss of self-identity when he is confronted with mounting racial hostility – ‘if he left he had nowhere to go’ (206). Critics contrast the liberal pre-war climate, as recalled by Srinivas, with post-war hostility and emphasise the parallels with the colonial violence which had prompted Srinivas to leave India in the first place.<sup>6</sup> While some read the novel as an explicit commentary on Powell’s Britain, others view it as a more universalist treatment of the alienation experienced by immigrants, with Chris Weedon describing it as a narrative of survival and Emmanuel Nelson condemning its apolitical stance.<sup>7</sup> For Ruvani Ranasingha, it is an ambivalent, watered-down critique of British racism, a gesture towards the implied Western reader.<sup>8</sup> Others yet consider it a precursor to the better-known British Asian novels of the 1980s, which feature more assertive second-generation protagonists, who are determined to fight back and respond to racist assaults.<sup>9</sup> This chapter contests both the universalist interpretation of Markandaya’s narrative and its alleged ‘diffident, apologetic critique’ of 1960s Britain, arguing instead that the novel’s dialogism speaks to the complexity of post-war race relations.<sup>10</sup> As in previous chapters, my analysis affirms the importance of the novel’s numerous minor characters in bringing to life its political argument.

Specifically, the chapter aims to contribute to the existing scholarship in three main ways. First, reading the text in parallel with contemporary sociological studies and surveys, I argue that Markandaya gives expression to the blend of tolerance and intolerance that characterises majority views, alongside the aggressive rhetoric and abusive actions of a minority for whom Powell acts as spokesperson. Inspired by Stuart Hall’s discussion of ‘racism at home,’ I focus less on the external drivers connected to the legacy of empire that pre-occupy most scholars in the field, and more on the internal factors, including the end of the post-war economic boom, the dwindling belief in the possibility of a classless society and mounting worries of internal disorder.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Hena Ahmad, ‘Kamala Markandaya and the Indian Immigrant Experience in Britain’, in *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. by Emmanuel S. Nelson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 141-48; J. Dillon Brown, ‘Double Displacements, Diasporic Attachments: Location and Accommodation’, in *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing*, ed. by Susheila Nasta and Mark U. Stein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 212-26 (pp. 224-25).

<sup>7</sup> Chris Weedon, ‘Narratives of Survival: Social Realism and Civil Rights’, in *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing*, ed. by Susheila Nasta and Mark U. Stein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 353-67 (p. 363; p. 366); Emmanuel S. Nelson, ‘Troubled Journeys: Indian Immigrant Experience in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nowhere Man* and Bharati Mukherjee’s *Darkness*’, in *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial*, ed. by Anna Rutherford (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1992), pp. 53-59 (p. 58).

<sup>8</sup> Ruvani Ranasingha, *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain: Culture in Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 155-57.

<sup>9</sup> Suresht Renjen Bald, ‘Images of South Asian Migrants in Literature: Differing Perspectives’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 17:3 (1991), 413-31 (pp. 419-21); Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (Palgrave: Basingstoke and New York, 2002), p. 182; p. 198.

<sup>10</sup> Ranasingha, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Racism and Reaction’, in *Stuart Hall: Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*, ed. by Sally Davison et al. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2017), pp. 142-57 (pp. 145-48; pp. 152-54).

Second, I turn again to contemporary reviews and ask what they tell us about Markandaya's project – to create a dialogue on immigration and confront white British readers with their own anxieties and prejudices. Continuing my interest in the reception of the middlebrow's political agenda, I ask whether reviewers acknowledge *The Nowhere Man*'s pressing political theme or whether they are affected more by its haunting personal story. As in previous chapters, I also consider whether reviewers perceive a tension between the novel's documentary ambitions and its narrative qualities. Contrasting the novel's largely positive press reviews with its lack of commercial success, I query whether the connection with the middlebrow is problematic.

Third, although not usually included in academic discussions of what Mary Eagleton terms the 'Angry Young Women' writers of the 1950s and 1960s, nor in middlebrow scholarship dealing with the personal anxieties of middle-class female readers, I will argue that Markandaya's narrative engages with topics that are central to women's writing of the period.<sup>12</sup> Exploring *The Nowhere Man*'s depiction of Ashcroft Avenue, I show that Markandaya shares an interest with the younger women writers in that she exposes the cracks that are appearing in the post-war social fabric, whilst expressing her frustration with the unfulfilled promises of the welfare state and the persistence of pockets of poverty in the 'affluent society.'<sup>13</sup> I further study Markandaya's use of the middlebrow tropes of the (sub)urban home and neighbourhood to denote the nation's ambivalent attitude towards migration, as well as broader anxieties about changing social structures.

### ***The Nowhere Man* and the politics of immigration**

The history of modern British immigration and race relations typically starts with the arrival of HMS Empire Windrush in June 1948, carrying several hundreds of immigrants from British colonies in the West Indies, many former servicemen.<sup>14</sup> Another crucial milestone is the 1948 British Nationality Act, which conferred free entry, residence and employment to all residents of British colonies and independent Commonwealth countries. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the number of immigrants from Britain's colonies and former colonies grew rapidly. They comprised workers and their families from the West Indies, alongside poorer workers from India and Pakistan. They also included the Kenyan Asians, arriving in 1967 and 1968 after policy measures introduced following Kenya's independence significantly reduced their rights and opportunities. But, as the numbers rose, so did popular demand for controls.

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Eagleton, 'Angry Young Women: Education, Class, and Politics', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1945-1975*, ed. by Clare Hanson and Susan Watkins (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 91-107 (p. 92).

<sup>13</sup> After John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (1958).

<sup>14</sup> This section draws on: Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997); Randall Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration in Post-War Britain: The Institutional Origins of a Multicultural Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Ian Sanjay Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire* (London and New York: Verso, 2021).

At the same time, public debates on proposals to end free Commonwealth immigration frequently revolved around the self-image of a liberal and tolerant nation.<sup>15</sup> A central pillar of official wartime propaganda, this image presented the nation as united across differences of class and ethnicity – a ‘people’s empire.’<sup>16</sup> After the Second World War, it was recycled to promote the Commonwealth as a multiracial family of nations.<sup>17</sup> The myth of the decent and tolerant nation had lost currency by the mid-1950s, with a competing narrative constructing Commonwealth immigration as a threat to the nation.<sup>18</sup> In the early 1960s, a new narrative of ‘decline’ and ‘crisis’ took hold, correlating imperial decline and immigration with weak economic performance, social unrest and breakdown of law and order.<sup>19</sup>

Narratives of disruption – immigrants threatening the boundaries between empire and metropolis – proliferated after the 1958 race ‘riots’ in Nottingham and Notting Hill, convincing Macmillan’s government that legislative action was required to restore public order.<sup>20</sup> Yet, as Randall Hansen explains, prior to 1962, both Conservative and Labour governments had been reluctant to introduce legislation that would either restrict entry from the so-called Old Commonwealth or require colour-based controls to stem the arrivals from New Commonwealth countries, India and Pakistan in particular.<sup>21</sup> By the late 1960s, public demands to halt mass immigration had intensified and both parties were ready to support new legislation, subscribing to the widely-held argument that good race relations required strict migration controls.<sup>22</sup> When the first Commonwealth Immigrants Act was passed in 1962, popular support for controls had surged, and so had the number of new arrivals.<sup>23</sup> Six years later, demand for restrictions on immigration was even higher, with the majority of Britons backing the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act.<sup>24</sup> Endorsed by both Labour and Conservative politicians, it has since been described as one of the most divisive and controversial decisions taken by a British government.<sup>25</sup>

Popular support for the government’s anti-immigration measures and for Powell’s Birmingham speech a few months later has been explained in racial terms, with Schwarz arguing that many of the letters sent to Powell evoked memories of a recent past when white authority prevailed, both in the

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<sup>15</sup> Webster, *Englishness*, p. 173.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7. According to Webster, this image hailed back to nineteenth-century notions of benevolent paternalist imperialism. Wendy Webster ‘Immigration and Racism’, in *A Companion to Contemporary Britain: 1939–2000*, ed. by Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 93–109 (pp. 95–96).

<sup>17</sup> Webster, *Englishness*, p. 92; Webster, ‘Immigration’, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> Paul, *Whitewashing*, p. 116; pp. 128–29; Webster, *Englishness*, p. 160; Patel, p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> Patel, p. 10; pp. 109–11; pp. 122–23; Hall, ‘Racism and Reaction’, pp. 148–49.

<sup>20</sup> Paul, *Whitewashing*, pp. 131–32; pp. 155–59; Hall, ‘Racism and Reaction’, pp. 147–48.

<sup>21</sup> Hansen, pp. 16–19. See also Paul, *Whitewashing*, pp. 130–32.

<sup>22</sup> Hansen, p. 26; p. 138; Paul, *Whitewashing*, pp. 177–79.

<sup>23</sup> According to a 1962 Gallup poll, two thirds of respondents approved the legislation (Hansen, p. 119). The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act ended the unrestricted immigration from the Commonwealth by requiring work permits. Many Asians were, however, able to enter Britain, until the 1968 Act introduced new controls.

<sup>24</sup> A 1968 Gallup poll found 72% support for the Act (*ibid.*, p. 161).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

colonies and at home.<sup>26</sup> Schwarz describes the anti-immigrant sentiment Powell and his letter writers express as the ‘restaging of the primal colonial encounter in reverse.’<sup>27</sup> According to Wendy Webster, a two-nation imagery took hold, with white Englishness represented in terms of quiet and respectable domesticity, and black immigrants associated with intrusion and disruption, their run-down houses and noisy streets signifying ‘domestic barbarism,’ encapsulated too in Powell’s headline story:<sup>28</sup>

Eight years ago in a respectable street in Wolverhampton a house was sold to a Negro. Now only one white (a woman old-age pensioner) lives there. This is her story. She lost her husband and both her sons in the war. So she turned her seven-roomed house, her only asset, into a boarding house. She worked hard and did well, paid off her mortgage and began to put something by for her old age. Then the immigrants moved in. With growing fear, she saw one house after another taken over. The quiet street became a place of noise and confusion. Regretfully, her white tenants moved out. [...] She is becoming afraid to go out. Windows are broken. She finds excreta pushed through her letter box.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, contemporary sources paint a more complicated picture, with opinion polls and surveys indicating that the majority of Britons believed that racial discrimination and injustice were morally wrong, even as immigrants themselves faced hostility and outright discrimination.<sup>30</sup> In a 1960 report by the sociologist Ruth Glass, this ambiguity is fittingly described as ‘benevolent prejudice.’<sup>31</sup> In Glass’s view, it expresses neither outward hatred nor sympathy towards ‘the dark foreigner,’ but ‘a combination of passive prejudice and passive tolerance.’<sup>32</sup> Passive prejudice, she explains, does not necessarily translate into discrimination, yet, at the same time, passive tolerance permits the persistence of restrictive practices.<sup>33</sup> It also results in a split mind, with survey respondents condemning discrimination in theory, but not in practice, and displaying friendliness towards individuals, but animosity towards the collective.<sup>34</sup> Glass’s remark – ‘[i]t is because tolerance is so

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<sup>26</sup> Powell’s speech was given extensive (and negative) coverage in the British media, but elicited significant popular support, expressed in letters, both to the press and Powell himself. Schwarz, *The White Man’s World*, pp. 37-40.

<sup>27</sup> Bill Schwarz, “‘The Only White Man in There’: The Re-racialisation of England, 1956-1968’, *Race and Class*, 38 (1996), 65-78 (p. 66).

<sup>28</sup> Webster, *Englishness*, pp. 165-66; p. 171. In her view, in the 1960s and 1970s, the term ‘black’ was commonly used to denote migrants from Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean, even though many South Asians did not identify as such (‘Immigration’, pp. 104-05). Hence, the term is best viewed as part of the racial discourse of the period, and the opposition with white Britishness it implied. For a deeper discussion of the race issue, see Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack’: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> Birmingham speech, 20 April 1968.

<sup>30</sup> Paul, *Whitewashing*, pp. 139-40. See also E. J. B. Rose et al., *Colour and Citizenship: A Report on British Race Relations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 596-97; Mica Nava, ‘Sometimes Antagonistic, Sometimes Ardent Sympathetic: Contradictory Responses to Migrants in Postwar Britain’, *Ethnicities*, 14:3 (2014), 458-80.

<sup>31</sup> Ruth Lazarus Glass, *London’s Newcomers: The West Indian Migrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961 [1960]), p. 217.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110-11; p. 126.

timid that prejudice is so infectious' – is, as I will argue, an apt characterisation of Srinivas's white neighbours, whose passive tolerance condones Fred's violent actions.<sup>35</sup>

Further evidence of what Glass calls the 'muddle, confusion and insecurity' typifying the popular attitude towards immigration is found in a 1967 survey, undertaken by the Institute of Race Relations and published in July 1969.<sup>36</sup> This too is centred on the concept of 'tolerance' and indicates that the majority of respondents harboured positive sentiments towards Commonwealth immigrants: 35% of respondents were described as 'tolerant;' a minority of 10% was classified as 'prejudiced' or wholly hostile; and the remainder 55% – the in-betweeners – either 'tolerant inclined' (38%) or 'prejudice-inclined' (17%).<sup>37</sup> At the same time, respondents overestimated the size of the immigrant population, had vague notions of cultural differences across immigrant groups, and offered equally vague responses when asked to clarify what they mean by 'adopting a more English way of life.'<sup>38</sup> It should also be noted that despite their efforts to understand the drivers of racial antagonism, the surveys and reports frequently employ the racially inflicted language of the period and construct the immigrant as 'stranger' or 'other,' and lacking the qualities of white Britons.<sup>39</sup>

Set against a background of post-war reconstruction and urban change, *The Nowhere Man* captures similar attitudes towards Commonwealth immigrants. In a letter to her editor, Markandaya mentioned that she spent two years writing *The Nowhere Man*, suggesting that she started work in late 1968 or early 1969 – amidst the turmoil following Powell's Birmingham speech and his subsequent dismissal from the Conservative Shadow Cabinet.<sup>40</sup> Powell's rhetoric features prominently in the novel, notably in its depiction of the attacks on Srinivas's home, which mirrors Powell's story of the elderly widow. It is reflected too in the racist discourse of Fred Fletcher and his mates. *The Nowhere Man* reverses Powell's imagery, with the elderly Indian, rather than the Englishwoman the subject of racially motivated attacks.<sup>41</sup>

Markandaya's perspective, which foregrounds the voices of older immigrants and their white lower middle-class neighbours, women in particular, differs from the novels of the so-called Windrush generation – particularly, Sam Selvon, George Lamming and V. S. Naipaul – who view the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>37</sup> Rose et al., p. 552-53. 'Tolerant' indicates no hostile answers to four key questions in the survey; 'prejudiced' indicates three or four hostile answers; and 'tolerant-inclined' and 'prejudice-inclined' denote one and two hostile answers, respectively.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 584-85.

<sup>39</sup> Chris Waters, "'Dark Strangers" in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963', *Journal of British Studies*, 36: 2 (1997), 207-38 (p. 209; p. 224).

<sup>40</sup> Kamala Markandaya, letter to Claire Walsh, 26 April 1973.

<sup>41</sup> Intriguingly though, at her publisher's request, Markandaya removed (unspecified) news excerpts that had featured at the beginning of her manuscript. Richard Walsh, letter to Innes Rose, 8 November 1971. Markandaya could have chosen from media headlines such as: 'An Evil Speech' (*The Times* editorial on 22 April 1968, p. 11) or "'Outrageous" Powell Speech' (Brian Rathbone, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 April 1968, p. 19).



immigrant experience through the eyes of young male West Indian protagonists.<sup>42</sup> It also departs from the male-centred narratives of Colin MacInnes, which fictionalise the encounters between West Indian, African and British men (and to a lesser extent women) in deprived areas of the capital, or from Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), which describes the experience of middle-class Indian students in 1960s London.<sup>43</sup> However, as we shall see later, her novel shares certain qualities with the works of female authors, such as Buchi Emecheta, Beryl Gilroy, and the playwright Shelagh Delaney, who depict the ambivalent reception immigrants receive in their white working-class neighbourhoods.

### **A multi-voiced debate on immigration**

The earlier-mentioned Institute of Race Relations report documents a gap between general attitudes towards race and immigration, and more specific responses, related to personal encounters in the neighbourhood, school or workplace. On the one hand, a majority of survey respondents believe that immigrants benefit unfairly from social services and 'took more out of the country than they put in it.'<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, these same respondents claim that it would be wrong to discriminate based on colour in the workplace and most have no objections to letting council dwellings to immigrants (a minority say that housing should go to 'our own people').<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, access to scarce services affects people's attitude towards immigration – less favourable responses are recorded in some (but not all) areas with a significant migrant presence – and this transpires too in the conversations between Srinivas's neighbours, Mrs Glass and Mrs Fletcher.<sup>46</sup>

In the first instance, their dialogue captures the mixture of ignorance, prejudice and uneasy acceptance that characterises the 'benevolent prejudice' Ruth Glass describes, rather than overt racial hostility. Mrs Glass remembers Srinivas's late wife Vasantha – 'Of course she was Indian. I mean she couldn't help it, could she? But I will say she kept her place spotless. Like one of us, although she wasn't, if you follow what I mean' (86). Meanwhile Mrs Fletcher reminds herself of her Christian duty and worries that Fred has wronged their neighbour, even though she secretly believes that Srinivas is 'peculiar, [...] Kept human ashes in the cellar – which Bert Glass had seen – and something cannibal about his gods (or his people, she wasn't sure which), whose toes were eaten away' (205). Yet when trying to reassure Srinivas, she is unaware that in doing so, she merely reinforces his growing unease:

You don't want to pay any attention to Fred, [...] You've got as much right to live here as what he has. [...] Even if you weren't born in this country, Mr Srinivas, you belong here, and don't let anyone convince you different. (206)

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<sup>42</sup> As noted earlier, Caribbean and African immigrant women found it difficult to publish their work, as they were excluded from male-dominated literary networks (Courtman, pp. 198-99).

<sup>43</sup> In particular, *City of Spades* (1957) and *Absolute Beginners* (1959). Of interest too is Burgess's *The Right to an Answer* (1960), featuring the arrival of a Sri Lankan researcher in a provincial town.

<sup>44</sup> Rose et al., pp. 570-71.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 575-80.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 581-83.

Together, Mrs Glass and Mrs Fletcher epitomise the ambiguous attitude towards Commonwealth immigrants, described by Ruth Glass: ‘They felt very close [...] just thinking how alike they were, especially when you compared them to other people. People of Many Lands’ (89). A sarcastic narrator adds: ‘Though Mr Srinivas, of course, was in England and almost one of the English, as the English themselves said in their more tolerant moods, bestowing the best accolade they could think of’ (89).

At the same time, both women voice the concerns recorded by sociologists and captured too by Huxley, as seen in chapter 6. They worry that the neighbourhood is changing character and that they will ‘be getting, [...] all sorts’ (103):

They’ll never be happy here, I said, this is a good residential area, they won’t fit it. Especially coming from Jamaica and all, like I’ve heard. It’s not us I’m worried about, mind. I’m looking at it from their point of view. But what’s the good of talking? (103)

They also resent the economic success of recent immigrants – ‘They’re the ones with the money these days’ (96) – and deplore the ‘subletting that turned respectable houses into rabbit warrens’ (199). Hence, they represent the mid-60s change in public sentiment, with race becoming the prism through which perceptions of crisis and disorder are being projected.<sup>47</sup>

Over time, Mrs Glass’s attitude hardens, as she comments on how immigrants ‘keep coming here, who asked them? One day they’re poor, living off the rates, the next they could buy us all up’ (245) and ponders whether ‘blacks would soon be taking over the country’ (316), echoing Powell’s claim that British people ‘found themselves made strangers in their own country.’<sup>48</sup> When wondering ‘what the country was coming to’ (316), Mrs Glass’s discourse exemplifies the language of ‘moral panic,’ which according to Hall, crystallises a society’s diffuse fears and anxieties.<sup>49</sup>

Notwithstanding the variations in their discourse, Mrs Glass and Mrs Fletcher display what Sinfield has called ‘structural’ or ‘common-sense’ racism. This is ‘structured into the language, into the prevailing stories through which the society seeks to understand itself’ and helps legitimate the social order.<sup>50</sup> It is the product of history, of a given culture, but may facilitate the expansion of phobic racism, which describes an individual’s unadulterated hatred for the racial other.<sup>51</sup> The latter is given powerful expression in Powell’s speech:

They found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places, their homes and neighbourhoods changed beyond recognition, their plans and prospects for the future defeated; at work they found that employers hesitated to apply to the immigrant worker the standards of discipline and competence required of the native-born worker; they began to hear, as time went by, more and more voices which told them that they were now the unwanted.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Hall, ‘Racism’, pp. 150-52.

<sup>48</sup> Birmingham speech, 20 April 1968.

<sup>49</sup> Hall, ‘Racism’, pp. 153-54.

<sup>50</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (second edition), (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 138.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-39.

<sup>52</sup> Birmingham speech, 20 April 1968.

Recasting Powell's rhetoric, Fred is convinced that the '[t]he blacks were responsible. They came in hordes, occupied all the houses, filled up the hospital beds and their offspring took all the places in schools' (202). Determined to take a stance 'against imminent calamity' (203), he singles out Srinivas, who represents 'the untold evils he and his kind were letting loose in his country, his beloved England' (204), and tells the latter: 'You got no right to be living in this country' (204).

Yet, in a further illustration of the dialogic nature of her novel, Markandaya counterposes the increasingly violent language yielded by Fred and his cronies – 'Bloody swine, [...] Deport the whole bloody lot' (255); 'Filthy mob, bringing their filthy habits with them' (275); 'you gotta smoke them out' (340) – with the unspoken opinions and ambivalent reservations of their neighbours: the pub landlord, who felt 'some convictions of equity' (275) and the crowd watching the eviction of Srinivas's tenants (a decision prompted by his and Mrs Pickering's concerns for their wellbeing when he is diagnosed with leprosy):

'Bloody Jew,' one of them (new to the district, a phoenix from a livid area) burst out, but was quickly squashed as a racist. Since no one wanted those ovens to be lit again, besides which it would introduce some undesirable blurring of roles, between oppressor and oppressed, between patriot and racist, which they were not and would never countenance being. No; what they wanted was a little weeding out, and a little elementary justice. (349-50)

But this 'little weeding out' points to deeper fears and memories of an ordered imperial past, which as Schwarz remarks, are partly hidden but carried into the post-imperial present through 'unconscious repetition of prior racial assumptions and practices.'<sup>53</sup> They erupt forcefully in Fred's purchase of a vintage regimental coat – 'laid, somewhere, sometime, on proud vice-regal shoulders' (343) – symbol of the violence of empire.<sup>54</sup>

### **Integration and the limits of liberalism**

Thus far, I have argued that the novel's dialogism is firmly grounded in the social landscape of late 1960s Britain, giving expression to historically specific antagonisms that appear too in sociological studies and surveys. Importantly, there is also a more liberal counter-narrative, which promoted the assimilation of immigrants, and the eradication of racial discrimination through legal measures.<sup>55</sup> Concerned with racial injustice, most literary scholars overlook the presence of more liberal voices in *The Nowhere Man*, notably Mrs Pickering and the third-person narrator.

Mrs Pickering is Srinivas's loyal companion and fellow outsider: '[She] was, true, one of them, but on the other hand she did live with Mr Srinivas, an Indian, some kind of pagan, though he was a good man,' a neighbour nervously reflects (225). Mrs Pickering provides reassurance when Srinivas is

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<sup>53</sup> Schwarz, *The White Man's World*, p. 204-05.

<sup>54</sup> See also Noemi Pereira-Ares, 'Sartorial Memories of a Colonial Past and a Diasporic Present in Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man*', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 50:2 (2015), 179-96 (p. 188).

<sup>55</sup> The product of more liberal thinking, the 1965 and 1968 Race Relations Acts sought to reduce racial discrimination. Hence, the brief period from 1965 to 1968 has been termed the 'liberal hour of race relations' (Rose et al., p. 10).

jolted by the Suez crisis and the country's reversion to 'peremptory imperial ways: ways which had shaped his life, been soil and seedbed for his own past anguish' (115). Thus, she tells him that she is 'with that half of the population that is against it' (116). She repeatedly reminds him that she and many others do not share the hatred and violence against immigrants (116). Mrs Pickering, the narrator tells us:

undaunted, joined forces with Mrs Fletcher, whose efforts though earnest tended to be spasmodic, and the stalwart landlord at the local, and those few who were prepared to stand up and be counted. But their voices came thinly, and were hardly to be heard against the chorus that swelled from the community, led by the furious top notes of Fred. (263)

But eventually she too acknowledges the country's altered climate:

'Oh, yes,' she agreed at once in her blunt way, 'evil exists, all right.'

'But it burns itself out, eventually.'

'Oh yes,' she agreed again. 'But I don't think the ashes that were left in Germany gave comfort to anybody, do you?' (353)

Through the dialogue between Mrs Pickering and Srinivas, Markandaya connects racial violence and the atrocities committed by the Nazis, echoing the third-person narrator's earlier description of the crowd's uneasy response to antisemitism.<sup>56</sup> The narrator too is positioned as an outsider, sympathetic to the plight of society's outcasts: 'There could be no denying, however, the presence of refugees. They loitered, pale and somewhat shadowy' (349). At other times, the voice appears to represent the entire community, united in their outraged response to Srinivas's ordeal: 'The entire parish, it seemed, was worn out' (305). However, such direct interventions by the narrator are infrequent, and this narrative voice is denied a privileged position.

The absence of a clear narrative hierarchy allows for the possibility of diverse readings, as the third-person narrator refrains from casting judgement on the views of either party, and the reader is instead invited to weigh a variety of viewpoints and reach their own conclusions. In previous chapters, I have described this plurality as characteristic of the writing of journalist-authors. Markandaya provides a strong moral steer as she closes her narrative. As Mrs Pickering and the third-person narrator are given the final lines, it becomes apparent that the implied author's sympathies lie with the quiet, liberal Englishwoman, and not with her anxious white neighbours:

'You mustn't blame yourself,' said Mrs Glass sweating.

'Blame myself,' said Mrs Pickering. 'Why would I? I cared for him.'

And, indeed, that seemed to her to be the core of it. (373)

Thus, Mrs Pickering and the narrator distance themselves, both from Fred's hostility and from the ambivalent reception offered by Srinivas's neighbours. But these dissonant voices are easily overlooked – Fred's aggression and Srinivas's passivity dominate the narrative (and subsequent

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<sup>56</sup> Lassner perceives a comparable link between imperial violence and Nazi atrocities in the post-war novels by Godden, Huxley and Manning (*Colonial Strangers*, pp. 5-7).

scholarship) – likely reflecting the author’s and the general public’s increasing pessimism as to the future of race relations in 1968 and hinting at the limits of a more liberal discourse on race relations.<sup>57</sup>

When Powell declared that ‘in 15 or 20 years’ time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man,’ he also claimed that full integration of immigrants and their descendants would be ‘a ludicrous misconception, and a dangerous one.’<sup>58</sup> But integration is an ambiguous term, poorly understood by the public and frequently recast as a threat to white authority.<sup>59</sup> As I will show next, Markandaya interrogates the concept of integration, but the emphasis is firmly on the experience of the immigrant.

For Abdul, Srinivas’s Zanzibari friend, political refugee and successful businessman, the prospect of integration is minimal – ‘First thing that goes wrong it’ll be *their* country, and you go back, nigger, to *yours*, back where you came from’ (92) – and he berates Srinivas for his naivety:<sup>60</sup>

Took my land from right under my nose, took my old man first so he wouldn’t bleat, took my pride so I never walked with my head up, took my freedom finally. [...] What’s come over you, man, that you can’t remember, seeing how you went through what I did? (92-93)

Abdul is under no illusion that he is seen as a ‘black ape, [...] in his overheated automobile’ (92), attributing racial stereotyping to the barriers he has encountered: ‘Seemingly it’s the blackness that offends whites more than the rest of the rainbow’ (95).

In contrast, Laxman contentedly believes that ‘[h]e belonged’ (322). Laxman, dismissively described by the narrator as ‘a pale brown Englishman with a pale pink wife’ (40), personifies the immigrant ‘whose wish and purpose is to be integrated and whose every thought and endeavour is bent in that direction,’ to use Powell’s words again.<sup>61</sup> ‘To be integrated into a population,’ Powell expands, ‘means to become for all practical purposes indistinguishable from its other members.’<sup>62</sup> Adopting Powell’s notion of integration, Laxman silently wishes his mother would ‘sink [...] indistinguishably into England’ (41). Laxman further personifies the period’s lack of attention to immigrants’ diverse backgrounds, which set up a simplistic binary of ‘white’ and ‘black.’<sup>63</sup> When summoned to visit his father after one of Fred’s assaults which has left the old man covered in tar and bound to a lamppost, Laxman is shocked to be called black: ‘Black Them, doing White Us. [...] He, as English as English could be, converted into Them by criminal illiterates’ (320-21). He becomes aware of ‘an uneasy feeling [...] as if he were being propelled towards some camp, or ghetto [...] into which he would be thrust, whether or not he belonged’ (321).

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<sup>57</sup> Rose et al., pp. 596-99. Relatedly, Nelson suggests that the fire engulfing Srinivas’s home foretells future large-scale racial violence in Britain (p. 56).

<sup>58</sup> Birmingham speech, 20 April 1968.

<sup>59</sup> Schwarz, *The White Man’s World*, p. 29.

<sup>60</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>61</sup> Birmingham speech, 20 April 1968.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> See footnote 28.

Determined to be ‘indistinguishable,’ Laxman rebels against ‘this indiscriminate humping and clumping that lined him up beside people like his father’ (322) and accuses his own father of ‘[s]ticking out like a sore thumb, instead of decently integrating’ (324). Yet in an unexpected reversal of affinities, Laxman angrily rebuts one of Srinivas’s tenants when told to ‘[g]o back where you belong’ (325): ‘Over two million of our men, [...] took part in the war. Fighting for Britain, which was threatened. As I did’ (326). Here, Markandaya provides a powerful counterbalance to Powell’s rhetoric, juxtaposing the widow, who lost her husband and two sons, with the thousands of Indian soldiers who died fighting a distant imperial war. But she also shows that Laxman’s notion of ‘decent integration’ is flawed and need not imply a disavowal of his own history. Interestingly, Huxley made a similar point when questioning whether immigrants ‘should come to resemble us and be made alike: digested, melted down,’ asking ‘should there be, and could there be, a halfway house in which any community that so wished could keep its customs while sharing our lives?’<sup>64</sup> Markandaya shows that this ‘halfway house’ is far from being realised in 1968.

In sum, Markandaya’s numerous characters illustrate the pervasiveness of both covert and overt discrimination towards Commonwealth immigrants in late 1960s Britain. Ashcroft Avenue no longer epitomises the wartime image (or myth) of a decent and tolerant Britain, nor the Commonwealth ideal of a multiracial family of nations. Instead, it exemplifies the contradictory attitudes towards immigration, the blend of tolerance and intolerance, of ignorance, prejudice and uneasy acceptance, which characterises the discourse of many ordinary people, and which operates alongside (and is likely charged by) the aggressive rhetoric and abuse of Powell and his acolytes.

Rather than viewing the novel’s ambivalent engagement with racism in Britain as a gesture towards the implied (white) British reader, I have argued in this and the previous section that Markandaya skilfully captures the plurality of post-war attitudes. In particular, the description of the ‘benevolent prejudice’ of Srinivas’s neighbours fittingly illustrates Ruth Glass’s phrase ‘[i]t is because tolerance is so timid that prejudice is so infectious,’ and it is precisely their passive tolerance which enables the aggression of Fred and his cronies.<sup>65</sup> Through its characters, the novel also underscores the Institute of Race Relations’ recommendation to focus policy action on the ‘in-betweeners,’ whose negative disposition could be attributed to misunderstanding or lack of knowledge.<sup>66</sup> But, the fictional narrative appears to depart from the report’s assessment that ‘the extent of tolerance in Britain cannot be stressed too often’ and that what is most needed, is to remind the British people ‘that they *are* unprejudiced.’<sup>67</sup> The next section explores how contemporary critics interpreted Markandaya’s novelistic treatment of immigration, recognising that some of her readers

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<sup>64</sup> Huxley, *Back Street*, p. 151.

<sup>65</sup> Glass, p. 218.

<sup>66</sup> Rose et al., p. 588; pp. 736-37.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 737. Italics in original.

may have voiced concerns similar to Powell's letter writers, or indeed, the novel's white English characters.

### Readers and immigration

Discussing *The Nowhere Man* ahead of its re-issue in 2019, the journalist Emma Garman referred to its earlier 'commercial and critical failure,' adding that Markandaya's 'unerring diagnosis of English society's fault lines from a perceived outsider – a woman and a foreigner – felt disconcerting or even impertinent to readers at the time.'<sup>68</sup> A closer look at contemporary reviews reveals a more nuanced picture than Garman suggests.

Allen Lane, Markandaya's British publisher, homed in on the outsider theme when advertising *The Nowhere Man* as '[t]he moving story of two outsiders, an elderly Brahmin and an almost destitute English woman whose relationship exposes them to the pain and violence of racial prejudice.'<sup>69</sup> Similarly, media commentators highlighted the novel's exposure of racial injustice and hostility in 1960s Britain and underlined the urgency of its theme, with some explicitly referring to the impact of Powell's rhetoric on popular thinking. The *Listener* drew attention to 'local Powellites [who] daub hang-the-wogs graffiti opposite his door' and the *Guardian*'s piece was entitled 'Enoch's England.'<sup>70</sup> The *TLS* noted Markandaya's exposure of 'the hideous suppurating threat of racialism – and at a timely moment for this country,' adding: 'Miss Markandaya is certainly aiming at a politically aware readership and is not afraid to be a Cassandra on racialism here and now. She deserves, and will surely receive, the guilty ear of us all.'<sup>71</sup> Addressing a more conservative readership, the *Daily Telegraph* observed: 'It is exactly the novel that needed to be written about racial prejudice in lower-middle-class suburban England.'<sup>72</sup> The *Sunday Express* struck a similar note when writing:

Increasingly Britain is becoming a multi-racial nation. Some native Britons view the development with hatred, fear or alarm, others with tolerance. But what of the black and brown Britons themselves, many of whom know no other home than these islands?  
A superb new novel [...] brilliantly conveys the bewilderment of an elderly and sensitive Indian who lives in South London.<sup>73</sup>

Likewise, two reader reports commented positively on the novel's treatment of racial attitudes, with one describing it as a 'moving and worthwhile novel about race relations in England today' and 'of remarkable perception and observation,' and the other singling out the 'chorus of two neighbouring

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<sup>68</sup> Garman, n.p.

<sup>69</sup> Adverts appeared in *Listener* (26 April 1973) and *TLS* (27 April 1973), amongst others.

<sup>70</sup> Ronald Bryden, 'Kinship', *Listener* 12 April 1973, p. 489; P. J. Kavanagh, 'Enoch's England', *Guardian*, 19 April 1973, p. 18.

<sup>71</sup> Marigold Johnson, 'Long Race', *TLS*, 20 April 1973, p. 465.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Maxwell Scott, 'Recent Fiction', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 April 1973, p. 10.

<sup>73</sup> Graham Lord, 'The New Books', *Sunday Express*, 8 April 1973, n.p.

women,' who 'show the changing facets of public opinion and prejudice with pointed accuracy,' adding '[w]hat is said and what is not said are equally revealing.'<sup>74</sup>

In common with the other novels discussed in this thesis, the 1973 reviewers were sensitive to the balance between fact and fiction. Most seemed to appreciate the documentary quality of *The Nowhere Man*, pointing to Markandaya's unique viewpoint as informed observer. The *Listener* remarked that '[t]he immigrant view [of it] has seldom been explored better,' while the *Daily Telegraph* wrote that the author who 'was born and bred in India, is perceptive, eloquent and remarkably *au fait* with our island ways.'<sup>75</sup> Likewise, the *Irish Times* noted that 'the book is about several kinds of suffering, and all are painfully well conveyed,' whilst the *Guardian* reviewer expressed her appreciation for the novel's impartiality: 'each is presented fairly.'<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, the *Daily Telegraph* hinted at the racist attitudes of its readership: 'The moral seems to be: that if only people, on either side, would have the heart to try to see things *as they are*, half our racial troubles would disappear. But, of course, they prefer to nurse their prejudices.'<sup>77</sup>

Some reviewers took issue with the violence perpetrated by Fred and his cronies.<sup>78</sup> The *Observer* claimed:

But much the most controversial point here must be the climatic fire planted under Mr Srinivas's dwelling by Fred Fletcher, a feckless and resentful yob. That a work otherwise tending towards the increase of general understanding – we know little enough of the lives of our Srinivases – should end in a familiarly opaque act of brainless malice, gruesomely believable though it is, struck me as unsatisfactory. A novel of this kind needs to do more than add to the general burden of guilt.<sup>79</sup>

The *Daily Telegraph* remarked that '[a]s her English instrument of prejudice, Mrs Markandaya selects a horrid, failed emigrant to Australia, Fred, a barely believable character who organises the amateurish tarring and feathering of the poor old Indian,' while the *TLS* reviewer appeared equally unconvinced by the brutality of the novel's principal character:

Although she produces this scene with horrific skill – the racist garbed in scarlet and white, as though deliberately recreating the Punjab officers [...] the buckets of tar and sacks of quilt feathers – Miss Markandaya almost spoils the balance of compassion that moves one to tears earlier in the book [...] one feel that these brutally caricatured ignorant thugs provide too crude an enemy.<sup>80</sup>

The *Times* reviewer dismissed the novel as 'ambitious and well-meaning [...] a little vague as to detail and idiom.'<sup>81</sup> This reviewer was irritated too by 'the gossiping Brixton mums [who] talk in the tones

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<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Rosenberg to John Guest, 17 September 1971; Chloe Green to John Farquharson, 24 October 1971.

<sup>75</sup> Bryden, p. 489; Scott, 19 April 1973, p. 10.

<sup>76</sup> Roy Foster, '30s Flashback', *Irish Times*, 28 April 1973, p. 10; Kavanagh, p. 18.

<sup>77</sup> Scott, 19 April 1973, p. 10. Italics in original.

<sup>78</sup> Bryden, p. 489; Kavanagh, p. 18.

<sup>79</sup> Russell Davies, 'Calypsos and Calories', *Observer*, 15 April 1973, p. 39.

<sup>80</sup> Scott, 19 April 1973, p. 10; Johnson, 20 April 1973, p. 437.

<sup>81</sup> George Hill, 'Fiction', *The Times*, 26 April 1973, p. 10.



of housekeepers out of Henry James.’ Meanwhile, the *Observer* cast doubt on the novel’s portrayal of interracial relationships:

Her bulgingly sagacious prose, lacking warmth, narrowly fails at important moments to enter into the spirit of its creatures, particularly the suburban housewives who look on as the oddly dilapidated gentlewoman Mrs Pickering moves in with the elderly melancholic Mr Srinivas. Similarly, the conversations of these housemates do not quite work; the cautious clipped high-table tone of faded aristocrats is very slightly overdone.<sup>82</sup>

The *Listener* was more ambivalent, noting that ‘some of the efforts to enter the racialists’ consciousness founder in baffled luridness,’ even though ‘mostly the novel is restrained, distinguished and sad.’<sup>83</sup>

For some reviewers the novel’s portrayal of race relations was unsatisfactory, leaving unclear as to whether their reservations pertained to the earlier-mentioned public pessimism about the future of multicultural Britain, unease with the novel’s broader theme or concern about its literary merits. Implicitly though, most reviewers appeared to endorse the didactic role of Markandaya’s novel, with the *TLS* noting: ‘She is far too good a novelist for didactic themes to obtrude on the reader.’<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, although Markandaya herself wrote about her dislike of the didactic novel – ‘novels and sermons are best kept apart’ – she admitted that political notes ‘have a way of seeping through.’<sup>85</sup>

Several reviewers also reflected on readers’ ability to participate in the novel’s intimate space, emphasising its affective qualities and possibly appealing to a more liberal mindset. Some highlighted the gentleness that permeates the novel and reflected nostalgically on the more tolerant climate of previous decades. The *Guardian* reviewer found evidence of shared Indian and British values:

It is done from inside without bitterness, with much understanding for our British virtues, but it makes us understand Hindu virtues also, and there is a gentleness in all this more shaming than any attack.

[...]

Because as well as being by an Indian it is Indian in spirit, written with imaginative sympathy about us. We need a bit of kindness and understanding at the moment, we also need to understand ourselves, and others, better. After reading this book you feel you have been on a long and enlightening journey.<sup>86</sup>

The *Listener* commended the novel for ‘remembering affectionately the England which found foreigners odd but acceptable, where Indian and native could share a bomb-shelter in the Blitz.’<sup>87</sup> Others referred to Markandaya’s novel as ‘compassionate and distressing,’ and ‘exceptionally

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<sup>82</sup> Davies, 15 April 1973, p. 39.

<sup>83</sup> Bryden, p. 489.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson, 20 April 1973, p. 437.

<sup>85</sup> Kamala Markandaya, ‘One Pair of Eyes: Some Random Reflections’, in *The Commonwealth Writer Overseas: Themes of Exile and Expatriation*, ed. by Alastair Niven (Brussels: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1976), pp. 23-32 (p. 30).

<sup>86</sup> Kavanagh, p. 18.

<sup>87</sup> Bryden, p. 489.

moving,' its style 'deceptively quiet and gentle, its impact powerful.'<sup>88</sup> Likewise, one of the reader reports praised the novel's affective qualities: 'It's a terrible and moving story that leaves one full of admiration for the author's wisdom and compassion which has been so skilfully infused into this novel.'<sup>89</sup>

The reviewers further highlighted the novel's interest in personal connections, and the warmth and compassion with which the relationship between Srinivas and Mrs Pickering is depicted, thus emphasising the empathy in the reading experience associated with the middlebrow.<sup>90</sup> For these reviewers, Mrs Pickering was central to the readerly experience of belonging, another characteristic of the female middlebrow.<sup>91</sup> The *Guardian* summarised the sentiments of a number of reviewers when describing Mrs Pickering as 'one of the successes of the book, English in a way we all hope we are English,' yet admitted that 'even across the deep love that grows between them shadows of misunderstanding fall.'<sup>92</sup> 'The happiness of the gallant pair,' the *Irish Times* commented, 'is poetically described and the ambivalence of English suburban good-neighbourliness delineated with delicate humour,' while the *Daily Telegraph* pointed out that 'under her guidance he [Srinivas] begins at last to feel at home in England.'<sup>93</sup> The *Observer* reviewer, as we have seen, was more reserved. And indeed, Markandaya's multi-voiced narrative may have challenged sections of her (white) middle-class audience, as it conveyed views and values that while resonating with some readers, would have been met with either disbelief by others, or with ambivalence, echoing the mixed reactions recorded by Huxley, Glass and others. Others yet may have been left to experience discomfort and possibly guilt.

### ***The Nowhere Man* and the middlebrow novel**

Although reviewers did not always represent the full spectrum of their readership, their commentaries nonetheless shine a light on the contemporary reception of the political middlebrow novel. In common with the other novels studied in this thesis, *The Nowhere Man*'s reviewers put weight on the author's expertise and appreciated her use of the fictional narrative to raise topical social and political matters. Significantly, Markandaya's reviewers were not averse to discussing her novel's political message, thereby distancing themselves from some of the reviewers encountered in previous chapters, who only fleetingly engaged with the politics of the respective texts. At the same time, the 1973 reviewers were keen that her plot and characterisation avoid melodrama, which in their view reduced the novel's impact. As such, they alluded to the porous boundaries between literary categories, whilst also hinting

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<sup>88</sup> Johnson, 20 April 1973, p. 437; Foster, p. 10; Lord, n.p..

<sup>89</sup> Chloe Green to John Farquharson, 24 October 1971.

<sup>90</sup> Radway, p. 262.

<sup>91</sup> Berlant, pp. 4-5.

<sup>92</sup> Kavanagh, p. 18.

<sup>93</sup> Foster, p. 10; Scott, 19 April 1973, p. 10.

at the importance of not departing too much from readers' expectations, a recurrent theme in this thesis.

Reflecting in later years on her own writing, Markandaya professed an ambivalent relationship with the English reader: 'having an idea of who one's audience is does not mean that one is writing for it,' yet admitting: 'one is aware of an audience, and at the same time that is the last thing one considers when writing.'<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere, she conceded wishing for 'one serious, good review in THE TIMES.'<sup>95</sup> Interestingly, both reader reports for *The Nowhere Man* had hinted at the possibility of an apathetic reception:

it should attract some good notices, but not, I fear, much in the way of sales.<sup>96</sup>

It's a novel of quality and weight which in other times would certainly have been thought worthy of publication. Whether it's a feasible undertaking in these lean years of fiction buying is another matter.<sup>97</sup>

In the event, despite the extensive coverage of *The Nowhere Man* in the British press, its sales were disappointing, and the book was remaindered in 1976.<sup>98</sup>

Clearly, *The Nowhere Man*'s mixed reception problematises its relationship with the middlebrow, which I have defined as fiction that appeals to a middle-class reading public. On the one hand, the reviewers in the previous section are sensitive to this audience when identifying several characteristics that would be of particular interest, including its documentary qualities, its didactic function and its affective appeal. On the other hand, Ranasinha's claim that Markandaya's writing attracted 'a small number of predominantly white people who enjoyed reading about India,' reminds us of the limited appeal of so-called highbrow texts.<sup>99</sup> Yet as seen too in chapter 5, Markandaya's reviewers voiced distinctly middlebrow concerns – about plot, characters, endings – alongside an appreciation of the author's commitment to authenticity. That she did not quite meet the expectations of her critics – and by implication her readers – is a reminder of the precarious position of the author, when writing for a fragmented interpretative community, not all sharing the author's values or outlook.

But there is one aspect of the novel which unambiguously acknowledges its middle-class reader, namely the figure of Mrs Pickering. An elderly white and impoverished middle-class woman, Mrs Pickering is an unusual protagonist in the end-of-empire novel. Despite her dedication to Srinivas and her liberal views, she is not a radical figure. Committed to her domestic duties, she exhausts herself to 'make the house as spick and span as the neighbours' (71) and prepares a '[s]plendid tea'

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<sup>94</sup> Markandaya, 'One Pair of Eyes', p. 29.

<sup>95</sup> Kamala Markandaya, letter to John Guest, 21 January 1972. Emphasis in original.

<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth Rosenberg to John Guest, 17 September 1971.

<sup>97</sup> Chloe Green to John Farquharson, 24 October 1971.

<sup>98</sup> Peter Carson, letter to Innes Rose, 6 August 1977. Ranasinha attributes the positive media reception to Allan Lane's extensive marketing efforts (p. 155).

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

(108) for Srinivas's estranged son, 'the scones, the tarts, the well-risen sponge' (108) meant to help heal the rift between father and son. Significantly, in this portrayal of Mrs Pickering, whose middle-class status is sketchily communicated through the middlebrow trope of woman's fashion – 'Expensive hats and gloves and shoes, [...] One always had them' (67) – Markandaya connects the uncertain position of the immigrant and what Maslen calls the hollowness of middle-class respectability.<sup>100</sup>

There is a further point of comparison with the female protagonists of 1960s women's writing, living on the margins of society and sharing the precarious lives of poor white Britons and non-white immigrants. As an example, Lynn Reid Banks's *The L-Shaped Room* (1960) recounts the experience of a young woman, who leaves her middle-class home to live in a run-down boarding house in West London, shared with several immigrants. Nell Dunn's *Up the Junction* (1963) describes the lives of white working-class women in South London, whose encounters with non-white immigrants are limited to the occasional foray into Brixton, where they view the squalor in which the latter live with indifference. Meanwhile, Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey*, which premiered in 1958, uses the main protagonist – a young unmarried northern woman, who has a brief romance with a black sailor – to expose working-class attitudes towards those excluded from mainstream society. Although Mrs Pickering's status as an elderly woman places her outside the conventional categories employed in studies of female fiction, she too acts as a focal point for class and racial anxieties. More generally, Markandaya shares an interest with the younger women writers in that she exposes emergent social tensions, including unequal access to housing and jobs, and the persistence of pockets of poverty. This hitherto unacknowledged aspect of her writing is discussed in the next section.

### **Home, immigration and the welfare state**

The political debate in 1960s Britain was shaped not only by the twin forces of decolonisation and Commonwealth immigration, but also by intense discussion of the goals and limits of the post-war welfare state. But the 'discourse of affluence,' memorably evoked by Macmillan when he told the British public in 1957 'you have never had it so good' and discernible in the fifties novels by authors such as John Wain, John Braine and Alan Sillitoe, whose central protagonists benefit from full employment and rising wages, proved unsustainable.<sup>101</sup> By the late 1960s, it had become apparent that investment in the welfare state had not brought about the expected erasure of economic inequalities.<sup>102</sup> And after Wilson's government was forced to devalue the pound in 1967 and tackle the mounting

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<sup>100</sup> Maslen, *Political and Social Issues*, p. 132.

<sup>101</sup> For example, John Wain, *Hurry on Down* (1953); John Braine, *Room at the Top* (1957) and Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958). See also Bentley, p. 51; Brannigan, pp. 44-46; pp. 48-49; Hammond, pp. 123-24.

<sup>102</sup> Robert Taylor, 'The Rise and Disintegration of the Working Classes', in *A Companion to Contemporary Britain: 1939-2000*, ed. by Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 371-88 (pp. 379-80). See also Brannigan, pp. 52-54.

public debt, the earlier post-war optimism had all but vanished, making place for a discourse of ‘declinism.’<sup>103</sup> This new mood, capturing anger and disappointment, permeates 1960s texts, such as Dunn’s *Up the Junction* (1963) and *Poor Cow* (1967), and Barry Hines’s *A Kestrel for a Knave* (1968).<sup>104</sup> The sense of promises unfulfilled is particularly visible in women’s fiction of the period, with authors ranging from Barbara Pym and Reid Banks to Dunn and Delaney portraying the struggle of those left behind in the affluent society.<sup>105</sup> Markandaya’s novel is, however, absent when literary scholars deconstruct the myth of the welfare state and the classless society. This section aims to fill this critical gap and discusses Markandaya’s depiction of the suburban home and neighbourhood, both as tropes denoting the nation’s ambivalent attitude towards migration and as markers of the fissures in the post-war social fabric.

In post-war fiction, the home has become the site of ‘reverse colonisation,’ no longer a metaphor for imperial stability, marking the (albeit fragile) boundary between coloniser and colonised depicted in earlier imperial fiction.<sup>106</sup> Instead, when Commonwealth immigrants and Britons meet in the novels of Burgess and Sillitoe, the domestic space acquires an ambivalent meaning, offering the promise of belonging, yet constituting a barrier to unconditional acceptance: ‘They’ll be in all our homes,’ one of Burgess’s characters reflects.<sup>107</sup> But, while figuring as a symbol of the embattled nation, the home is associated too with the immigrant’s sense of isolation and feeling of impermanence, seen for example in Lamming’s *The Emigrants* (1954), Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and *The Housing Lark* (1965), and Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* (1967).<sup>108</sup> In *The Nowhere Man*, this ambivalent response to immigration is played out in a South London suburb, where Srinivas’s home is convivially referred to as ‘No. 5’ and his family as “‘the people at No. 5’”, although towards the end of the war a few brave souls did venture to say “‘the Srinivases’” (25).

Markandaya further uses the tropes to signify the uneasy co-existence of tolerance and prejudice, discussed earlier in this chapter. Gazing at Srinivas’s house through their net curtains, Mrs Glass and Mrs Fletcher are concerned that his neglect of the property after his wife’s death ‘[l]owers the tone’ in ‘a nice residential district like this’ (86). Here Markandaya reprises an older image, of the colonial woman as guardian of domestic order (also explored in earlier chapters), expressed in the

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<sup>103</sup> Jim Tomlinson, ‘The Decline of the Empire and the Economic “Decline” of Britain’, *20th Century British History*, 14:3 (2003), 201-21 (p. 202). See also Hugh Pemberton, ‘Relative Decline and British Economic Policy in the 1960s’, *The Historical Journal*, 47:4 (2004), 989–1013. For a critique of the discourse, see Jim Tomlinson, ‘Economic “Decline” in Post-War Britain’, in *A Companion to Contemporary Britain: 1939-2000*, ed. by Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 164-79.

<sup>104</sup> Nicola Wilson, ‘Working-Class Fictions’, in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 7: British and Irish Fiction since 1940*, ed. by Peter Boxall and Bryan Cheyette (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 64-79 (pp. 76-77). Brannigan notes that persistent poverty does not feature prominently in the writings of the Movement or the Angry Young Men (p. 54; p. 59).

<sup>105</sup> For example, Eagleton, p. 92; Hammond, p. 125; p. 128.

<sup>106</sup> Webster, *Englishness*, p. 180; Whittle, p. 175.

<sup>107</sup> Burgess, *Right to an Answer*, p. 113. See also Whittle, p. 168; pp. 172-74.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167; pp. 172-73; Nasta, *Home Truths*, p. 63; pp. 75-77; John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 32-33.

metropolitan context by ‘clean lace curtains, clean windows, neat house fronts, washed front steps.’<sup>109</sup> But whereas some immigrants were deemed to fail to meet these standards, here the two women are pleased to note that the late Mrs Srinivas kept the house ‘scrupulously clean, as you could tell just by looking at the shine on the doorstep’ (86). At the same time, Mrs Fletcher does not feel able to enter Srinivas’s home when she walks over to offer her apologies for Fred’s behaviour, as her legs ‘wanted to scuffle off sideways around the nearest corner, carrying her to safety’ (205).

John McLeod observes that diasporic women writers portray the immigrant neighbourhood as spaces which fail to protect women from the racism and sexism encountered in the wider city.<sup>110</sup> Their work counters the more optimistic and occasionally utopian visions of London, featured in the 1950s novels of Selvon and MacInnes.<sup>111</sup> Women’s fiction further heralds what McLeod calls the stalled multiculturalism of 1970s fiction, which describes the lives of the urban poor in the newly built council estates and the struggle of those dependent on the welfare state.<sup>112</sup> For example, Emecheta’s *In the Ditch* (1972) recounts the obstacles experienced by a single mother of Nigerian descent as she attempts to build a better life for her children and herself. Here the home signifies the failure of the dream of belonging, as institutional racism and the bureaucracy of the welfare state keep its occupants stuck ‘in the ditch.’ Elsewhere, McLeod briefly mentions *The Nowhere Man* in his overview of 1970s postcolonial texts which offer ‘bleak visions of loneliness, endurance and pain for “inside-outsiders,”’ the result of both the loss of mutual support in migrant communities and the indifference of their white neighbours.<sup>113</sup> In part, *The Nowhere Man* conforms to this scenario, as it depicts the evolution in racial attitudes, from the communal Blitz years to the overt hostility of Fred and his cronies. However, Markandaya’s take is more ambivalent, as she locates the lonely immigrant in a predominantly white neighbourhood and offers him a chance of integration in British society, even as his neighbours ‘returned his smiles but scurried past’ (84), typifying the mixture of compassion and hostility, mentioned earlier.

The home and neighbourhood also convey Markandaya’s critique of the faltering welfare state, an aspect of her novel which has been overlooked by critics. ‘This country has no time for the poor or the old’ (192), Mrs Pickering remarks, summing up the failure of the discourse of affluence and the ‘rediscovery’ of poverty in the 1960s, which followed from the fifties’ optimistic belief in the ability of the state to promote economic growth and eradicate poverty and inequality.<sup>114</sup> Recognising that the faultlines in post-war Britain encompassed multiple marginalised groups, *The Nowhere Man* gives

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<sup>109</sup> Webster, *Englishness*, p. 166. Similar comments are recorded in Huxley’s *Back Street* and Sheila Patterson’s, *Dark Strangers: A Study of West Indians in London* (1963).

<sup>110</sup> McLeod, *Postcolonial London*, p. 124.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33; pp. 57-58.

<sup>112</sup> John McLeod, ‘Postcolonial Writing in Britain’, in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature: Volume 1*, ed. by Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 571-603 (p. 586).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 586. McLeod also cites *Moses Ascending* (1975) as exemplifying the loss of Selvon’s earlier utopian optimism (*ibid.*).

<sup>114</sup> Brannigan, pp. 53-55; p. 66.

visibility to the urban poor, trapped in unskilled jobs and slum-like housing alongside poor immigrants. Significantly, Markandaya associates urban poverty with a range of factors other than immigration, as she describes the rootlessness of the young – ‘Youthful gangs [...] from the fringes of the neighbourhood, where respectability tapered away into the uncertain realms of prefab and slum’ (106) – alongside the despair of the homeless and the dismal futures of the old and the unemployed. Although, as we have seen earlier, she draws attention to the economic factors driving Britons’ distrust of immigrants, she refuses to accept excuses for their racist hatred. Her narrator comments sympathetically on the ‘exhausted homeless, [...] their numb misery fermented, waiting for obscene voices to nominate scapegoats on whom they could offload the frustrations of their living’ (201).

Through Mrs Pickering, she expands on this theme:

In its shuffling ranks, she saw, [...] the lineaments of the deprived, the disaffected, the hopeless, the haters, the ambitious, of exploiters, and the exploited, cruel scorings upon faces which, later, would rise like welts upon the skin and call for whipping boys and reparations. (264)

Some came from the high-rise flats, whose foundation stones she had watched being lowered from the jibs of towering cranes, seeking an outlet for the unnameable maladies that afflicted them; some from the tenement blocks on the fringes of the district where boundaries met, and boroughs were as skilled as single citizens in shifting the burden of civic responsibility. (264-65)

Further social tensions are alluded to – striking gravediggers cause the postponement of Mr Fletcher’s funeral (236) and striking tanker drivers lead to the closure of schools (320) – suggesting dwindling public support for the post-war economic model. Throughout the narrative, we detect other glimpses of economic hardship – when by 1965, rising prices and dwindling incomes prompt Srinivas and Mrs Pickering to take in tenants, they are inundated with applicants (198) – illustrating the unequal distribution of the fruits of the post-war welfare state.

Disillusionment also characterises the nation’s attitude towards the National Health Service, with Srinivas’s GP Dr Radcliffe reflecting on his medical colleagues ‘harping away at being overworked and underpaid’ (193). Radcliffe’s resigned attitude contrasts sharply with the image of the NHS as a symbol of post-war modernity and progress, which Philips and Ian Haywood detect in 1950s romantic fiction.<sup>115</sup> By the late 1950s, this optimism was waning as the strains in the system became apparent.<sup>116</sup> Of interest too is the medical publication Radcliffe is seen reading and which ‘concerned itself with the welfare of the sick, who might fall into foreign hands’ (295-96):

On their behalf it inquired into the qualifications of those who tended them, their medical skills, their command of English. It hazarded – for facts were facts, and must be faced – that these might not, perhaps, come quite up to standard, the standards of Britain which the world envied. (296)

Equally overlooked is the novel’s concern with the impact of modern architecture on the urban landscape. On Ashcroft Avenue, new council flats replace the old semis and their gardens, part of new

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<sup>115</sup> Philips and Haywood, p. 94; p. 98.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

community schemes to house the homeless. These cause some anxiety – ‘Everything built over,’ Mrs Glass comments (104) – as the suburban landscape becomes unrecognisable to these long-standing residents:

They had lived through demolition, and rebuilding, and road widening, through community planning and trial runs for ring roads. They had seen the elms chopped down along their avenue, and the piles being driven in, and new housing taking place of the old. They had got used to the traffic, and their truncated front gardens, to the accelerating sounds of the age, and to the sight of perpendicular buildings framed in their front and back windows. (200)

Slum clearance, the building of new housing estates and ring roads were key planks of the post-war modernity drive.<sup>117</sup> But there is a dehumanising element to these new buildings: ‘Tier upon tier they rose, these concrete quarters for the living, and into them disappeared the exhausted homeless, delirious with the happiness of having a place of their own’ (201). Depicted as an alienated space – the newly housed ‘would feel the loneliness of heights, and yearn for gardens and fences to drape their friendliness over’ (201) – the suburban neighbourhood is a zone of exclusion, as the homeless ‘waited outside, names on lengthening housing lists, looked up with envy, contrasting the comforts of modern living with their own squalid existence, crammed five and six to a room’ (201).

Middlebrow fiction associates the home not only with women’s ambivalent attitude towards their domestic commitments, but also with the isolation felt by the middle-class woman in her modern, servant-less house.<sup>118</sup> When this fiction depicts the building of new housing estates and suburban developments, replacing crumbling Victorian terraces and unaffordable country houses, it connects modernity with middle-class anxieties about social change, as well as the loss of traditional (white) community values, also seen in chapter 6.<sup>119</sup> There is an element of nostalgia too in *The Nowhere Man*, as Srinivas joins his British neighbours in mourning the demolition of the old terraced houses and the small patch of land ‘exuberant with ferns and vines, buttercup and bindweed’ (105), where he had first met Mrs Pickering. But unlike his neighbours, Srinivas feels unable to express his misgivings, ‘for although he was so nearly one of them he could not quite command the liberties and licences of the English’ (105). By foregrounding the immigrant’s silent unease about the loss of community, Markandaya transcends the middlebrow’s anxiety about changing social structures, implicitly demonstrating the blind spots in the category’s (or its scholarship’s) imaginative thinking about a ‘domestic sphere in state of flux.’<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Kynaston, *Modernity Britain*, pp. 46-52.

<sup>118</sup> Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, pp. 110-11. Examples include Lettice Cooper, *The New House* (1936) and Mollie Panter-Downes, *One Fine Day* (1947).

<sup>119</sup> Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, p. 111.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*



## Conclusion

This chapter has examined Markandaya's novelistic treatment of the immigrant experience in 1960s Britain, proposing a historicist interpretation, which is supported by evidence from contemporary opinion polls and surveys. Contesting previous claims about its universality, I have argued that the novel's dialogism speaks to the complexity of race relations in 1960s Britain, as it exposes the racist discourse of Powell and his sympathisers, as well as the blend of tolerance and intolerance shown by ordinary Britons. Furthermore, by painting a picture of post-war Britain, with its slightly run-down suburban streets, soulless modern council flats, housing queues and a strained NHS, Markandaya conveys concerns about the socio-economic drivers of anti-immigrant sentiment, even as she refuses to condone the discourse which led to successive legislative acts limiting immigration.

In common with the end-of-empire novels discussed in the previous chapters, *The Nowhere Man* attributes multiple meanings to the middlebrow trope of the home. Here, it signifies the nation's ambivalent response to immigration, as well as the period's apprehension of disorder, seen too in Huxley's *A Man from Nowhere* and associated with an 'internal enemy' threatening the values of the old imperial nation.<sup>121</sup> The home and the neighbourhood also denote anxieties about urbanisation and the persistence of pockets of poverty in the affluent society. Recalling the neglected colonial home in *Goat to Kali*, its post-imperial metropolitan replacements, the council estate and the high-rise flat, complete the narrative arc described in this thesis, from the lost illusion of imperial authority to the perceived threat of 'reverse colonisation' and disillusion with the post-war welfare state.

While not customarily viewed as a middlebrow novel, I have argued in this chapter that *The Nowhere Man* shares certain characteristics with the female middlebrow, in particular its documentary qualities, aimed at educating the reader, and its affective qualities, offering an emotional reading experience through empathy with its fictional characters. At the same time, the mixed response of contemporary reviewers illustrates the challenges faced by the writer who has to negotiate with a fragmented readership, holding divergent political views and bringing diverse expectations to their reading. While my analysis has emphasised the political and social relevance of Markandaya's novel, it has also foregrounded the difficulty of labelling writers, or as Markandaya herself put it, the danger of putting writers 'in the appropriate package [...] to keep like with like.'<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Schwarz, 'Introduction', p. 10.

<sup>122</sup> Markandaya, 'One Pair of Eyes', p. 26. Markandaya refers to the label 'Commonwealth writer overseas,' adding that editors like 'keeping the women, bless their hearts and tiny minds, together. Santha Rama Rau, Attia Hosain, Nayantara Sahgal and I have rubbed shoulders together for well over a decade' (ibid.).

## CONCLUSION

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said emphasises the role of the Western novel in consolidating and maintaining the edifice of empire:

The *continuity* of British imperial policy throughout the nineteenth century – in fact, a narrative – is actively accompanied by this novelistic process, whose main purpose is not to raise more questions, not to disturb or otherwise preoccupy attention, but to keep the empire more or less in place.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently, he expands on the role of metropolitan culture in challenging the ideology of empire:

Without metropolitan doubts and opposition, the characters, idiom, and very structure of native resistance to imperialism would have been different.

[...]

Just as culture may dispose and actively prepare one society for the overseas domination of another, it may also prepare that society to relinquish or modify the idea of overseas domination.

[...]

we should acknowledge that, at both ends of the redrawn map, opposition and resistance to imperialism are articulated together on a largely common although disputed terrain provided by culture.<sup>2</sup>

Although Said is examining a relatively narrow set of nineteenth and early twentieth-century texts, his observations are pertinent too to the novel of decolonisation, in particular his conceptualisation of the Western novel as a platform for articulating competing visions of empire, and his emphasis on the metropolitan reader's response to the text. Similar considerations underpin my study of the female novel of decolonisation. But my immersion in middlebrow scholarship has allowed me to take Said's – and much of subsequent postcolonial scholarship – into a new and exciting direction.

In the first instance and inspired by middlebrow scholars' commitment to read beyond the canon, my thesis has studied a selection of now-forgotten novels, some by better-known authors, others by writers who have disappeared from view. Each of the seven novels analysed in this thesis engages overtly with the politics of decolonisation, with the authors drawing on personal memories, as well as their own extensive research. Covering late colonial political deliberations, insurgency and counterinsurgency campaigns, neocolonial industrial partnerships, as well as the fraught politics of immigration, their end-of-empire narratives dramatise the complex withdrawal from empire and invite their metropolitan readers to participate in a fictional debate on the politics and economics of decolonisation.

In the second instance and reflecting on the professional backgrounds of the five authors, I have argued that they follow in the footsteps of interwar women writers, who used the middlebrow form to convey their political beliefs to their middle-class readership. When Leslie, Huxley, McMinnies, Han and Markandaya create dual political and romantic plots, introduce characters whose

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<sup>1</sup> Said, *Culture*, p. 88. Italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

lively dialogue captures issues of topical interest, and weave in references to historical figures and events, they work in the tradition of the interwar political middlebrow. Together with tropes and themes familiar to readers of the domestic novel – the home, family, fashion, work– these middlebrow narrative conventions carry their authors’ political sensibilities, without abandoning the promise of a pleasurable and exciting reading experience.

As a literary genre, the middlebrow is heterogenous, its boundaries fluid, its influences manifold. As we have seen, Leslie’s and McMinnies’s portrayals of late colonial society are reminiscent of earlier imperial writing, whereas Huxley resorts to conventions of imperial adventure and crime fiction. Tropes of the imperial exotic abound in Han’s rendition of post-war tourism in the Himalayas, while Markandaya embeds her immigrant novel within a suburban setting, encountered too in the novels of younger female metropolitan writers. Furthermore, when Huxley imbues her political narrative with sensationalist imagery or when Han indulges in elaborate descriptions of her heroine’s passionate love affair, arguably the middlebrow loses some of its distinctive qualities, as it can be seen to borrow from popular (lowbrow) genres. Yet, what unites the seven novels and creates an affinity with the broader middlebrow category, is their twin commitment to inform and entertain their reader, achieved through their documentary and dialogic qualities. We see these narrative strategies at work in the deliberations of Leslie’s Bengali terrorists and Huxley’s Mau Mau fighters; in McMinnies’s ‘New Look’ and Han’s cosmopolitan gatherings; amongst Markandaya’s dam builders, and in the later novel, her gossiping suburban neighbours.

Many middlebrow novels exhibit a concern with middle-class anxieties, typically centred on worries about social standing and class identity. In the novel of decolonisation, these assume a new, expanded meaning, even though they are evoked through similar tropes (the home and household) or emerge in familiar settings (the local pub or colonial club). Leslie and McMinnies encapsulate these anxieties in the image of the run-down colonial home, symbol of the loss of imperial authority, as well as the uncertain personal futures of the men and women who served the British Empire. Han and Markandaya transplant former colonial Britons to postcolonial settings, where mingling with a new and more dynamic group of expatriates and representatives of the new nation-states, they are shown up as minor, bigoted characters, personifying both the reduced status of Britain as a global power and the contested legacy of empire. In Huxley’s and Markandaya’s later novels, perceptions of internal disorder, brought about by a dwindling belief in the post-war welfare state and the pressures of increased Commonwealth immigration, are given powerful expression in the depictions of rural village and suburban neighbourhood.

Mindful of their largely female readership, women writers also employ the domestic middlebrow genre to speak to the middle-class reader about the disappointments of domestic life and the constraints women experience in their personal and professional lives. Besides offering intricate detail about the domestic world of its female readers (fashion, food, home decoration), the female middlebrow deploys comedy and irony to subvert the values supporting the post-war middle-class

ideology, which saw women as wives and mothers, and their homes as central to social stability. In the novel of decolonisation, these themes are somewhat in the background, as both men and women are caught up in the dismantling of the empire. However, the ironic mode retains its validity as a marker of female frustration and disillusionment, for instance, when the authors describe female protagonists coming to terms with their reduced public role in the service of empire and the loss of expatriate privileges.

Nevertheless, the tensions between conservative and more progressive visions of marriage, motherhood and women's careers, encountered in the domestic middlebrow, are much less prominent in the female novels of decolonisation studied in this thesis. The seven texts do, however, share the former's subversive qualities in their treatment of colonial politics. We see this at work when Leslie's female protagonist questions the long British presence in India, or when Markandaya and Han channel their critique of neocolonialism and development through their female British characters. In contrast, Huxley's and McMinnies's women continue to offer their support to the (masculine) imperial project, even as they are cognisant of the changing political reality. Strongly dialogic, the seven novels rely not only on their female characters to question and challenge the dominant discourse of decolonisation, but also on their third-person narrators. Often the dominant voice amongst the chorus of competing actors, it is the narrator – the author's spokesperson – who typically offers the most strident criticism of empire and its legacy.

Additionally, this thesis has made the case for recognising the contributions of the countless secondary characters participating in the political discussions at the centre of the seven novels. Representing a range of viewpoints, these minor figures bring to life the myriad contradictions inherent in the discourse of decolonisation. They also resist a straightforward interpretation of female end-of-empire fiction as nostalgic for the former empire or apologetic for its representatives. To the contrary, they point to the shortcomings of the British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya, undermine the British view that the Cripps mission in India had failed because of Congress's intolerant attitude, and expose the Mau Mau insurgency as more complex than claimed by Kenya's white settlers. They destabilise the confident rhetoric underpinning Nehru's modernisation drive and foreground the geopolitical motives of American foreign aid in South Asia. And they give expression to Britain's ambivalent response to immigration, explaining both the social and economic drivers of racial intolerance, as well as the liberal compassion shown by the Mrs Pickerings of this world. An overlooked aspect of women's middlebrow fiction, primary and secondary characters, together with assertive narrators, create a Bakhtinian multi-voicedness, which lends the novel of decolonisation its political tenor.

In some respects, the association with the middlebrow may be problematic though. If we define the middlebrow as the fiction that appeals to a wide, mainstream reading public, then we cannot account for the lukewarm reception and disappointing sales of some of the novels studied in the thesis. If we assume that the middlebrow author targets a homogeneous middle-class readership

and responds to their literary preferences and social concerns, then we cannot explain the reviewers' ambivalent response to the novels' political and social themes. Yet, if we foreground their use of the middlebrow form – plot, character, resolution, setting – then we may come to see the decolonising middlebrow in a different light. This thesis has argued that the featured writers' liminal position – acknowledged expert in colonial matters and metropolitan outsider – means that they need to attract a metropolitan readership that may not be wholly aligned with their views and outlook. Familiar with the earlier novel of empire, this audience may also bring certain expectations to their reading: a taste for the exotic; a demand for authenticity; a memory of popular imperial tales (Conrad, Kipling, Somerset Maugham). The familiar middlebrow genre can then be viewed as a means to bridge the gap between author and reader, between distant colony and metropolitan centre. As demonstrated in the thesis, in some instances, authors successfully negotiate the balance between informing and entertaining the metropolitan reader; in other cases, they fail to convince their reviewers that their novels will appeal to the middlebrow reader.

Having made the case for viewing the novel of decolonisation as exemplary of the political middlebrow, a further complication arises when considering that some of the commentators dismiss their political content. While many reviewers in the British press appreciate the authors' expert knowledge of colonial politics, they do not necessarily wish to see it take centre stage in the novel. At the same time, reviewers invariably commend the novels' documentary and dialogic qualities, which they attribute to the authors' fairness and dedication to fact-based reporting. But they rarely take these features as an invitation to engage with the novels' political agenda or acknowledge the criticism of the dominant political discourse embedded in their fictional narratives. It is unclear whether these omissions reflect the reviewers' expectations regarding women's fiction or a broader aesthetic vision of the post-war novel.

The thesis's extensive engagement with contemporary reviews further invites a reflection on the position of the political middlebrow in the broader literary landscape. Some literary historians have described the immediate post-war period as a conservative return to realism, followed by innovation and rebellion in the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>3</sup> This simple opposition, unsurprisingly based on a limited canon, has since been contested by literary scholars, who detect innovative elements in the fiction of the 1950s and early 1960s, as well as a challenge to the post-war status quo.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that prominent post-war novelists and critics defend the realist form as particularly suitable for the exploration of topical political and social issues. For example, Priestley believes that if the novelist wants to write about 'men in a particular society, and with the character of that society,' then modernism's 'highly subjective, interior monologue' will not suffice: 'In the

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<sup>3</sup> Rabinovitz, p. 2; Bernard Bergonzi, *Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and its Background 1939-1960* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 207-08; Bentley, pp. 15-16; Brannigan, pp. 5-6; Gasiorek, pp. 2-5.

<sup>4</sup> Brannigan, pp. 9-10; Bentley, pp. 27-31; p. 129.

unending dazzle of thoughts and impressions, society disappears and even persons begin to disintegrate.’<sup>5</sup> Wilson admits that verbal experiment has created ‘a sort of intellectual and emotional separateness from responsible society at large,’ prompting a return to ‘the formal frameworks of plot, narrative, sub-plot, suspense.’<sup>6</sup> Others yet, such as Lessing, Lamming and Naipaul, take realism as their point of departure, but recognise the legacy of modernism as they incorporate experimental elements into their work.<sup>7</sup> Thus a more variegated picture emerges, with the realism versus experimentalism polemic gradually replaced by the acceptance that the post-war novel is fluid and historically contingent, and admits a variety of narrative modes as writers explore different ways to represent their social and political reality.<sup>8</sup>

Building on these insights, the thesis has located the decolonising middlebrow within its literary-historical context. Mindful of the literary preferences of their post-war readership, I have argued that the featured authors embrace the realist practices of the nineteenth-century novel, as well as its interwar middlebrow heir, yet are willing to depart from familiar plot conventions or inject unexpected perspectives. They are observant too of the interests of their female, middle-class audience, yet not averse to radically altering familiar tropes and images, or to prioritising political debate over romantic plotlines. Seen within the broader post-war landscape, the female novel of decolonisation, like its domestic counterpart, therefore endeavours to meet generic cultural norms, even as its thematic interests speak to a particular set of political circumstances.

To conclude, the main contribution of this thesis has been to draw attention to the centrality of the politics and economics of decolonisation in women’s post-war fiction, thus contesting a subsequent scholarly view that British fiction either ignored the end of the empire and its legacy or could only view the empire through rose-tinted lenses. In this regard, it is useful to recall Salman Rushdie’s much-cited essay *Outside the Whale* (1984), where he denounces the wave of 1980s Raj novels and films, grimly remarking: ‘the British Raj, after three and half decades in retirement, has been making a sort of comeback. [...] These are dark days.’<sup>9</sup> Rushdie’s frustration is with the sustained Orientalist representation of the East, its support for the racist ideology of imperialism, and what he terms the ‘revisionist enterprise’ of Thatcherite Britain.<sup>10</sup> But the imperial nostalgia embedded in these so-called Raj Revival products also generates the conditions for the nation’s ‘postcolonial melancholy’ and, according to Paul Gilroy, led to the denial of its imperial past, its brutal horrors and unsettling feelings of shame diminished or repressed.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> J. B. Priestley, *Literature and Western Man* (London: Heinemann, 1962), p. 341.

<sup>6</sup> Angus Wilson, ‘Diversity and Depth’, *TLS*, 15 August 1958, p. 464.

<sup>7</sup> Gasiorek, p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8; p. 18; pp. 180-81.

<sup>9</sup> Salman Rushdie, ‘Outside the Whale’, *Granta*, 11 (March 1984), p. 1. <<https://granta.com/outside-the-whale/>>. Rushdie refers primarily to *The Raj Quartet* and *The Far Pavilions* (both popular television series) and David Lean’s film *A Passage to India*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 90.

Nostalgia is the hallmark too of several novels published in the 1970s, notably Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), Scott's *Raj Quartet* (1966-74) and *Staying On* (1978), and Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1975). All revisit earlier moments in Britain's imperial history, and while not overtly endorsing the imperial project, they nonetheless articulate a sense of loss and disillusion with its ending.<sup>12</sup> Although featuring critical (or in Farrell's case, ironic) voices who refuse to underwrite a benign view of empire, their central focus is on the re-telling of the British imperial experience.<sup>13</sup> Farrell, Jhabvala and Scott won the prestigious Booker Prize and consequently enjoyed substantial sales and publicity. If we view the prize, as Luke Strongman proposes, as a reflection and portrayal of the state of culture after empire, then the three winners indicate that the discourse of nostalgia had already permeated British culture by the mid-1970s.<sup>14</sup>

If imperial nostalgia and amnesia are the dominant modes of 1970s British fiction, the same cannot be said about the previous two decades. This thesis has demonstrated that British end-of-empire novels of the 1950s and 1960s capture a much wider range of interests and emotions. Viewed within their historical context, the female texts studied in this thesis are attentive to concurrent political arguments on the nature and pace of decolonisation; to differing views on the tactics of British counterinsurgency efforts; to the contested aims of foreign aid and development; to the nation's contradictory attitudes towards immigration. Nostalgia is not entirely absent though. It emerges in Leslie's descriptions of the colonial home; in Huxley's reflections on the achievements of the Kenyan settlers; in McMinnies's portrayal of the disappointments of expatriate life. It is present too in Huxley's and Markandaya's depictions of a kinder Britain, haling back to the war-time rhetoric of the 'people's empire.'

The thesis's second key aim has been to broaden the scholarly scope beyond the texts and reading strategies prioritised in postcolonial scholarship. As explained in the introduction, postcolonial literary criticism has tended to favour a relatively narrow set of high-profile authors, whose writing often adopts experimentalist techniques. 'I am tempted to overstate the case, for purposes of illustration,' Neil Lazarus declares, 'there is in a strict sense only one author in the postcolonial literary canon. That author is Salman Rushdie.'<sup>15</sup> Despite a recent trend towards greater inclusiveness, it remains the case that many female middlebrow texts are ignored, the political significance of their writing unappreciated.<sup>16</sup> As this thesis has argued, we find in the female middlebrow novel a political sensitivity and immediacy, which combined with its dialogic and documentary qualities, can challenge established notions of British post-war culture, succinctly

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<sup>12</sup> Other examples are Godden's *The Peacock Spring* (1975); Kaye's *The Far Pavilions* (1978) and *Shadow of the Moon* (1957 – revised and re-issued in 1979); Manning's *The Levant Trilogy* (1977-80).

<sup>13</sup> Luke Strongman, *The Booker Prize and the Legacy of Empire* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 1994, pp. 24-25; McLeod, 'The Novel', p. 82; p. 92.

<sup>14</sup> Strongman, p. ix; pp. 1-3.

<sup>15</sup> Lazarus, p. 22. As noted earlier, an exception is Whittle's study of non-canonical male authors.

<sup>16</sup> Bongie p. 7; pp. 289-90. For example, Bongie points to an emerging critical interest in postcolonial crime fiction (pp. 312-13).

described by one recent commentator as a ‘toxic cocktail of nostalgia and amnesia.’<sup>17</sup> Further research of the middlebrow novels by both male and female authors may enrich our understanding of the crucial 1950s and 1960s, when political realities and socio-cultural relations underwent significant changes, some resonating loudly today, others barely audible amidst the clamour of twenty-first-century cultural debates.

It seems fitting to end this thesis with Bakhtin, whose writings on dialogism have guided much of my thinking over the past few years. Born in imperial Russia and living in exile for extended periods, Bakhtin (1895-1975) was repeatedly persecuted for his political beliefs, but never ceased to be fascinated by the ability of language to contain multiple meanings.<sup>18</sup> For Bakhtin, language is a shared event, a dialogue between different speakers, an exchange of different meanings and intentions, and so is the modern novel.<sup>19</sup> The female writers of my study exemplify his belief that the novel is uniquely suited to the expression and organisation of this multiplicity – the coming together of ‘speaking human being[s]; [...] bringing with them their own unique ideological discourse, their own language.’<sup>20</sup> Studying Bakhtin, the modern researcher is also reminded to embrace the diversity and fluidity of the novel. The novel, he writes, ‘is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review.’<sup>21</sup> Reading the forgotten middlebrow novels of decolonisation offers the researcher a unique opportunity to discover the myriad ways in which women novelists brought late colonial politics to life. Empire impinges on the middlebrow, its politics neither eschewed, nor vindicated; its memories of resistance and counter-resistance enfolded in the post-war public imagination.

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<sup>17</sup> Sathnam Sanghera, *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), p. 191.

<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, p. xx; Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (second edition), (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 9

<sup>19</sup> Holquist, pp. 28-31; pp. 72-73.

<sup>20</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, p. 332.

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