STORYTELLERS, SHAMANS AND CLOWNS:
POSTCOLONIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SUPRA-HUMAN
IN THE NOVELS OF R. K. NARAYAN, NURUDDIN FARAH,
BESSIE HEAD, BEN OKRI AND SALMAN RUSHDIE

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I hereby declare that the work herein, now submitted as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Northern Territory University, is the result of my own investigations, and all references to ideas and work of other researchers have been specifically acknowledged. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any other degree, and is not being currently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

Maggi Phillips
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the various ways in which a group of contemporary writers from African and Indian cultures address spiritual affairs within their fictions. The neutral terminology "supra-human" indicates that the analysis treats each worldview as an equally valid explanation of the "reality" of phenomena beyond that which is materially verifiable and, at the same time, highlights the pantheistic nature of the human and numinous relationships which underpins these texts. The investigation shows that the cultural symbols employed both structurally and semantically by R. K. Narayan, Nuruddin Farah, Bessie Head, Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie in their narratives describe the tensions that arise between a culture's sense of continuity and the historical and political pressures for change generated by their respective postcolonial conditions. Thus, the narratives are concerned with the maintenance of personal and societal identity, the restoration of a holistic form of meaning and the healing of psychological disjunctures caused by colonial and, in some instances, postcolonial fragmentation. All processes are found to involve, in one way or another, a perceived intervention of supra-human powers.

Narayan's The Guide and Farah's Close Sesame survey the lives of two distinct "holy" men whose deaths (or transitions into an after-life) prove to be beneficial for their respective communities. The use of dreams or altered states of consciousness as healing mechanisms frame Head and Okri's narratives. The trauma of Head's life experience, as portrayed in A Question of Power, resembles a shamanic initiation ritual while Okri's answer to the malaise of Nigerian politics in his abiku novels lies in people's efforts to acquire shamanic perceptual and thus healing powers. In Midnight's Children, a clowning Rushdie treads a tenuous path between an acceptance of and a resistance to all possibilities that involve supra-human explanations. He advocates a new sense of spirituality forged by art's mediation of secular and sacred ideas but he cannot finally divest himself of his clownish fear of absurdity. In spite of their diverse means and backgrounds, the writers demonstrate that the human impulse to explain the workings of the universe
is invariably countered by a need to maintain the potential of mystery within human understanding. Finally, the thesis contends that supra-human ideas continue to exert a powerful influence on the human imagination.
INTRODUCTION: THE WAYS OF THE SPIRIT
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As the full moon by shedding soft light helps the buds of the lotus to open, so this Purana by its exposition expands the human intellect. The lamp of history illumines the whole mansion of the womb of Nature.

The Mahabharata (Narayan's translation)

The contemporary storytelling of R. K. Narayan, Nuruddin Farah, Bessie Head, Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie is characterised by repetition and innovation. Each artist contributes to their culture’s storytelling traditions in works which transmit the ideas and symbols of creation and origins through frames of change and renewal. The process leads, moreover, to creative acts that are deeply implicated in supra-human contact whereby human perception engages with phenomena that lie beyond the material categories of an empirically-tested "reality." This thesis sets out to elicit the means and implications of supra-human engagement and, thereby, to propose that, in the addressed works, art and spiritual questing are inextricably entwined.

Though storytellers of the written word in a language that is not their mother-tongue, the artists forge links with different aspects of the world’s vast repertoire of oral literature on which they were nurtured from birth or have recovered from experience. Their creations convey a sense of performance within communities both large and small in which symbolism and allusion relate to, and often contest, specific social constructions of identity. Delivered with attention to vocal inflections, their stories re-create the exchange between teller and audience, re-mapping the old stories in response to the pressures of contemporary conflict and change, weaving tradition into the multiple options of modernity. However, these five storytellers are not a naturally cohesive group in some sort of relation to orality. Instead, they have been chosen for their cultural and stylistic diversity in a loose geographical net cast over India and Africa. The extent of this diversity can be seen even by a cursory glance at the five writers in question: Narayan, the unassuming Hindu ironist, dwells on the vagaries of small town Malgudi; Farah, an intellectual Somali, re-constructs
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his estranged homeland in fine-crafted leitmotifs; Head, a South African coloured woman, re-creates her identity, alone with her son in the backlands of Botswana; Okri, a young Nigerian, writes about wonder and spirits from his London residence; and Rushdie, the bombastic urban comic, celebrates his "mongrelised" inheritance far from his Bombay birthplace. These five, united by the fact that they write in the postcolonial era, have all been touched, in one way or another, by the dilemmas and the enrichment to be gained from multiple cultural influences. Each artist's work, moreover, engages the mysterious phenomena of the supra-human, albeit through different modes of characterisation, perception or experience, as a crucial presence in their fiction.

Mindful that terminology may mislead, I wish to define some workable parameters for the terms "postcolonial" and "supra-human." "Postcolonial," in my usage, functions as a superficial though useful marker of historical time (for my purposes from 1947 and Indian Independence to the present) in which nations and their heterogeneous ethnic groups experience a release from the direct political control of colonialism. Though "postcolonial" defines the literature arising in English since independence in relation to the former "colonial" narratives, I would like to propose that "postcolonial" is also a term which exposes, in a plurality of alternative voices, the colonisers' limited command of meanings. Consequently, the term itself becomes a self-parody of little substance that is unable to contain the storytellers, shamans and clowns who emerge with their multicultural senses of identity to challenge the parameters of the postcolonial literary product. Each artist's reaction to the jumbled possibilities that arise when colonial rule ends is indicative of their personal situations within the changeable contexts of nation-building and socio-political rehabilitation. Although traces of complex social change do filter through the Malgudi landscape, the postcolonial era of writing seems inconsequential to Narayan's depiction of the mundane trials and errors that pervade Hindu life. On the other hand, a common multicultural heritage and the failure of independence in their respective homelands play a major role in determining the content and style developed in the work of Farah, Okri and Rushdie. Their fiction appropriates postcolonial conditions as subjects. Head, informed by the harsh colonial climate
of apartheid, experiences independence only in the Botswana of her adult writing life which, as she observes herself, meant little because that country had rarely attracted the attention of the colonial powers. Interestingly, her position vis-à-vis colonialism widens to a general denunciation of all human groups that act as if they are culturally or ethnically superior to others. In all instances, whether explicit or implicit, the colonial contact and subsequent withdrawal offers these writers, in addition to all the institutionalised injustices of imperialism, an “excess of being”¹ from at least two cultures as a resource for their art. It is, therefore, quite natural that these artists demonstrate a keen sense of the plurality and interconnectedness available in their respective worlds.

"Supra-human" is meant to express that which is more than--above, beyond, other than, further back, earlier, higher than--purely secular facts about the human experience, gained through empirical knowledge or scientific inquiry. The term purposefully valorises all cosmologies or worldviews as equally valid interpretations of the ways of the spirit. The choice of "supra-human" is an attempt, on my part, to avoid the connotations which arise with respect to the more common alternatives of "the sacred" and "spirituality." "Sacred" is often given a monotheist weighting and "spirituality's" associations with "new-age" phenomena tend to attract spurious connotations. Consistent with authorial diversity, the supra-humanness that emerges in this study is fluid, numinous, multi-faceted, sometimes ungraspable, at times a specific God and elsewhere experiences of altered states of consciousness or liminality. The methods through which writers use different genres and descriptive means to evoke supra-humanness underpin this analysis which is both comparative and author-specific. Further, the term implies that humans partake, in one form or another, of the god-force, the integration of the human with the supra-human being common to the texts under discussion. The research thus aims to illuminate supra-human diversity and to trace the individual artist's complex responses to his or her personal and cultural backgrounds, with special reference to storytelling and spiritual

traditions.

The study is divided into three broad sections relative to subject matter rather than in any consideration of genre, chronology or the cultures shaping the various texts: "Holy men, Sacrifice and Martyrdom," "Dream Environments and Shamans" and, finally, "Clowns and Comic Transcendence." The first section deals with Narayan's The Guide and Farah's Close Sesame because these texts focus on the lives of characters who, according to their respective religious backgrounds, Hinduism and Islam, are seen as "holy" men. In tandem, the two novels provoke several questions. How do written narratives portray and, in so doing, persuade readers of the credibility of two quite distinct kinds of holiness? Do both writers, consciously or otherwise, shape the holy men's lives around religious concepts? Do the narratives address the tension between continuity and change in religious ideas? A measure of familiarity with the cultural and religious contexts of Hindu India and Muslim Somalia reveals how faithful both writers are to the conceptual schemas of their particular environments. Curiously, despite the differences found in the narratives' plots, styles, conceptualisation and symbolism, there is a striking similarity in Narayan's and Farah's treatment of their holy men's encounters with death. In each novel, the narrator moves away from a privileged position in their central character's consciousness, a strategy which shrouds Raju and Deeriye's dying moments with enigmas and invites interpretations of sacrifice or martyrdom. Both novels comply, broadly, with the genre of psychological realism, although Narayan's understated comic irony and Farah's poetic style are perhaps more significant traits to consider in the interpretation of their narratives.

The numinous potential of dreams and altered states of consciousness determine the coupling of Head's A Question of Power with Okri's The Famished Road and Songs of Enchantment in the second section, though their particular supra-human affiliations outside the so-called "big religions" also play a role in the decision-making. Although their dream frames would suggest that the works may belong to generic categories such as surrealism, fantasy, magical realism or, in Head's case, some form of psychotic narrative, there are a number of arguments and circumstances that indicate otherwise. In the first instance, Head writes
autobiographically, especially--although this is impossible to verify--in terms of Elizabeth's dreams. Head's letters reveal examples of dreams which later surface in the novel and in an interview with Linda Beard she admits that if the book fails it is due to her "interpretation". If one accepts that she is describing, selectively--as do all fictional narratives--a real experience, then, how can her novel not be realistic? Most commentators have avoided the issue by claiming A Question of Power to be an account of Head's psychosis, understood as an irrational angle on reality, and hence not realism according to the normal understanding of the genre. Certainly, this narrative is different but that does not disqualify its claim to a form of mimetic referentiality nor question the validity of that representation. Hers is a storytelling that aims for a psychological truth which happens to include manifestations of psychic phenomena, some of which exist autonomously from the human mind. Thus, if a distinction needs to be made then I would call A Question of Power "psychic realism". Okri's abiku novels raise an opposite problem because they are clearly not autobiographical, though the narrative is grounded in an unfamiliar Nigerian worldview. What genre is applicable to writing that claims "a realism with many more dimensions,"2 involves a search for "a higher kind of consciousness"3 and deals in altered states of consciousness? Whereas Head is in the psychic realm due to first-hand experience, Okri arrives there, as it were, in his efforts to discover more effective strategies to overcome Nigeria's--and by extension, Africa's--failed postcolonial history. So, despite their different reasons for probing myths and the mind's inner layers, I would place Okri together with Head in a genre of "psychic realism" rather than with magical realism or fantasy.

Head's protagonist and fictional "self," Elizabeth, re-creates through her dream experience a private belief system, aggregating many mythical and religious notions into a unified and earth-centred sense of the numinous. In the process, Head creates a sense of identity for herself which had been denied her by the tragic circumstances of her birth. A Question of Power thus deals with healing through

2 Okri in Ross, 338.

3 Ibid 340.
suffering which is, at once, psychological, psychic and numinous. The process leads to an hypothesis that Elizabeth's mental breakdowns are comparable to shamanic election rituals. Shamans, here, are defined as all spiritual healers who employ altered states of consciousness as the main resource for their healing methods. Whereas Head's fiction arises from her own tortured life, Okri's *abiku* or spirit-child novels are created from an imaginative journey into the worlds and dreaming of a Yoruba-like cosmos. In the face of the social and political failures of Nigerian independence, regenerative healing, Okri suggests, may be achieved through a penetrative perception which taps into altered states of consciousness or into the co-existent worlds of indigenous belief systems. He thus advocates healing social breakdowns by shaman-like methods. Where Narayan's and Farah's "holy men" encounter death, Head's and Okri's characters gain, however tenuously, a sense of well-being and transcendence in this world. In their various ways, all the writers deal with the issue of liminal states, whether as a form of threshold transcendence attained in passing from this world into the next, or as an alternative consciousness wherein regenerative powers are available for the benefit of this world.

"Clowns and Comic Transcendence" has but one contender. This is Rushdie's story of India, *Midnight's Children*, which extends the liminal territories of mystics and madness to the comic communication of clowns. Comic art values the transformative, if transitory, nature of laughter as another means of spiritual engagement. In humour, the intellect grasps incongruous connections and consciousness leaps, during the act of laughter, into an altered form of awareness wherein, I would suggest, this-worldly pains are momentarily healed. It is the comic artist who precipitates, though remains apart from, this temporary transcendence. Humour propels *Midnight's Children* and narrator Saleem's misguided bid for centrality. The latter is found wanting before the multiplicity and mixing of sacred and profane phenomena in the India of Rushdie's narrative. Doubt and uncertainty act as necessary precursors for this plurality in which mongrelised ideas of supra-humanness abide in the secular writer's worldview. Rushdie's notion of plurality affects the generic status of his work for his stylistics ingest all manner of influences from literary, mythic, cinematic and popular sources. However, the writing's most
abiding trait is its humour which, considering Saleem’s sense of performance and the relationship between clown and audience, leads me to propose that Midnight’s Children be seen as a clowning narrative. In Rushdie’s challenge to the normal sombre tones of supra-human discussions, the relation between art and spiritual affairs is given sharp relief. His position, shared by all the writers in this study, suggests one of two possibilities: either the artists remain true to their cultural traditions’ natural acceptance of art as the expression of the spirit, or they desire to redress the fragmentation and category-specific tendencies of the twentieth century. Okri’s forthright advocacy of the latter position, I believe, speaks in some measure for his fellow writers:

We are now becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the linear, scientific, imprisoned, tight, mean-spirited, and unsatisfactory description of reality and human beings. We want more because we sense that there is more in us ... We need ritual, initiation, transcendence of consciousness ... These are things that are always part of all societies. It’s just that we went ahead and forgot ... The thing is that it’s time that we started healing the human spirit by giving back to it its full, rich, hidden dimensions.4

The need to perceive life through holistic lenses is a theme that arises, time and time again, in the analysis of Narayan’s, Farah’s, Head’s, Okri’s and Rushdie’s work, an analysis which itself is shaped by a desire to give the human spirit back “its full, rich, hidden dimensions.”

culture, truth and symbols

The coupling, in this thesis, of the postcolonial and the supra-human is an

intrepid enterprise for two initial reasons: I am, myself, implicated in a plethora of colonial frames, one of which, critical analysis, provides the parameters for the whole exercise and, additionally, I am dealing (as an outsider) with systems of belief which are experienced as truth in the contexts of the fiction under study. Consequently, I have to guard against assumptions ingrained in my particular subjective frame and question conclusions, as much as is possible, from a grid composed of two principal perspectives: scholarly objectivity and any culturally-alternative knowledge manifest in the texts. Local knowledge, given in these texts, should be acknowledged as genuine insight into human and supra-human behaviour. Additionally, my position necessitates paying close attention to Jean-Pierre Durix's warning that "[a]ny comparative approach involves the risk of oversimplification or of reductionism, especially when the material used is so varied and so broadly international, and when it bears on cultures that have reached such different levels of economic development."5 James Clifford's discussions of culture raise another contentious issue for he cautions that culture should be thought of "not as organically unified or traditionally continuous but rather as negotiated, present processes."6 Some of the fluidity of culture, suggested by Clifford's stance, is conveyed through the fiction under study but is more difficult to sustain, I would suggest, in analytical modes of thinking which Katherine Hayles admits are so embedded in western thought "that we take the environment to be the artifact and the collection of factors to be the reality."7 I recognise the wisdom of ideas that are inextricable from the flux of time and from our perception of that time, but non-poetic linear language tends only to approximate that complex movement of


meaning.

From a slightly different position, Jean-François Lyotard claims that "truth" discourses are impossible "because one is caught up in a story, and one cannot get out of this story to take up a metalinguistic position from which the whole could be dominated." However accurate Lyotard's views are, we still act as if we can stand apart from the stories that embroil us because that is how language is seen to operate in an institutionalised sense. At the same time, the unfixed nature of culture and our own embeddedness in the narratives we tell make statements about "truth" unavoidably relative. Since we are caught in a conflict between the desire to grasp truth/s and the limitations imposed on such desires, the human imagination, as I see it, acts as a compensatory mechanism that creates alternative means of expression and understanding which are able to surmount some epistemological impasses. Moreover, William Paden suggests that in supra-human contexts, the imagination "has not yet exhausted the possible ways of seeing the human situation. There is always another context, another lens, another imagining, another way to thematize the world. Religions themselves are some of these ways." Paden's position presents the multiplicity of options available to systematic ways of viewing the world; the authors of this study increase the diversity of those options through their individual form of imaginative experimentation. Mindful of truth limits and coexistent frames of perception, this thesis maps one of the many possible stories to be told about written texts, different cultures and the "experienced" unknown.

My theoretical approach to the single story--and its inherent multiplicity--can be summarised as eclectic engagement. Through a formal undertaking, I have pledged myself to the texts and their supra-human subjects, prepared to go into battle, on their behalf, with any analytical tool that seems appropriate. However, my main analytical tool is textual symbolism and related rhetorical devices such as


metaphors, riddles and analogies. In the hands of verbal artists, symbols convey diverse ideas and complex concepts, creating patterns which, directly or indirectly, produce meaning. Paden states that the "world forms itself around our symbols--whether they are impersonal scientific concepts, poetic metaphors, religious images, lines of music, or the movements of dance." (my emphasis)\textsuperscript{10} In narrative contexts, texts \textit{reveal their fictional worlds} through symbols. Symbols encode a culture's value-systems which at once \textit{determine} thought formulation and are \textit{determined by} the living thought, habits and practices of individuals in their social setting. This two-way process exerts a powerful hold on creativity because creativity's very nature is embedded in the culture, a part of its day to day sustenance and excretions. At one level, the reverence accorded to a culture's sacred texts sets those texts apart, so much so that we tend to think that their language and conceptual designs are above use in non-religious contexts, whereas in actuality the words, concepts and imagery generate a hypnotic hold on the communal imagination. Once within the mind, images are processed, internalised and subjected to change in ways equivalent to physical transferences, such as infection, osmosis and leakage, so that the image may alter but the residue or imprint is never totally lost in the imaginative flux. Artists tend to capitalise on the fluctuations and contradictions within these processes for their own purposes. In spite of an emphasis on symbolic communication, I have avoided being tied to a single theoretical stance. Instead, I work from textual analyses in conjunction with anthropological, philosophical and literary research on the specific cultural environment and, where appropriate, examine the author's biographical details to develop a reading of that text's symbolism and conceptualisation. In some instances, clear conceptual patterns link the texts with their religious underpinning so that Farah's \textit{Close Sesame}, for example, can be said to be a metaphorical mosque of words. On the other hand, Head's \textit{A Question of Power} emerges as a direct metaphor of her actual life struggle to re-create herself. Each writer manipulates his or her symbolic material for distinctive purposes but all would agree with Farah when he observes that the writer

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid 8.
"speaks of hell and heaven in a language of images, symbols and metaphors. In other words, the images, the symbols and the metaphors are his guide: they communicate the incommunicable."

speaking of the spirit

What sort of "incommunicable" phenomenon is "the spirit" upon which this research is based? I am not referring, here, to the separate beings that we will meet in Okri's work but to that essence of the self which belongs to the same order of experience as "heart" and "soul." The spirit, in this sense, constitutes an emotional and psychic means of apprehending "reality" as distinct from the mind's intellectual capacity to reflect upon sensory and abstract evidence of "reality." Stereotypically, the first is thought to be an irrational mediation of "reality" while the second is its rational counterpart and, together, they form the age-old dichotomies of emotion and intelligence, faith and material knowledge, art and science. Henry Plotkin, for instance, states that

[science claims to establish knowledge of the world in which emotional knowledge has been no part. Art seeks to understand the world through emotional knowledge ... The "two cultures" of science and art have their origins in domain-specificity of all human knowledge. It is not that they are "best" kept apart, but they are apart: they are different forms of knowledge."

While western thought has institutionalised such a separation, recent theory tends to view knowledge acquisition, of any order, as the result of a complex interaction of mind, body, emotion and various forms of consciousness. Nonetheless, art and


spiritual knowledge do emerge as categorically distinct from scientific worldviews. The disparity would suggest that different combinations of the various learning modes create distinct lenses by which to view a chosen "reality." Moreover, relatively small differences in learning modes will be increased by the culture's attitudes and expectations about the chosen reality. Several significant factors arise from the theoretical impasse over the distinctions between art/spirituality and science: art and spirituality are not simply confined to the emotional side of human nature; people can operate with the different lenses at different times; and one's sense of spirit can be secularly or spiritually grounded. Hence, speaking of the human spirit generates problems of meaning and definition.

To complicate matters, other cultures conceive the spirit differently. In the Yoruba culture which informs Okri's abiku novels, the spirit is the quintessential being of an individual, the embodiment of that person's character, capacity for knowledge and his or her relations within the social network. Consequently, the Yoruba worldview is spirit-centred, meaning that all phenomena (in the immediate world of nature and the alternative worlds of the unborn and the dead) are connected to the individual spirit as well as to the larger spirit (or consciousness) of the community. It is, in other words, a big-picture conceptual frame. While I am using Okri and the Yoruba as the clearest example of spirit-centred vision, a similar tendency is evident in all the work under consideration: Narayan's Hinduism reveals an awareness of the inviolable link between the flawed individual human spirit and the inconceivable perfection of brahman, the universal consciousness; Farah, in his portrayal of Islam, consciously seeks an afterlife in which the limited human soul will achieve its union with and totality in God; Head's soul-seeking Elizabeth discovers the numinous powers in the hearts of dispossessed African people; and Rushdie, unexpectedly, sustains a wide-reaching, if ephemeral and secular, spirit through laughter that is both individual and shared. Spirit-centred visions thus tend, to a greater or lesser extent, to blur the distinctions between the various types of knowledge available for human contemplation.

On another level, Okri's The Famished Road and Songs of Enchantment explore spirit centred worldviews not only as a fundamental theme but as the mode
of perception for interpreting those narratives. In other words, Okri's text forces the reader to adopt a holistic or interconnected view of phenomena in which the spirit is also the cosmos. As in Lyotard's idea that we are unable to extricate ourselves from the stories that we tell, perception in Okri is both a seeing and being part of the vision. A further relevant analogy is to view perception in terms of dreaming, wherein the dreamer is aware of the state of dreaming and is at once within the action of the dream. Okri's vision of "our mythic frame that shapes the way in which we affect the world and the way the world affects us"\(^\text{13}\) shares some characteristics with Ernst Cassirer's "mythico-religious" thought. Cassirer derives his perceptual mode from the idea that myths are fonts of knowledge and a mode of thought itself. In *Language and Myth*, he claims that knowledge reveals, if imperfectly, the "nature of the mind" rather than the nature of things\(^\text{14}\) and, moreover, that knowledge is "a fiction that recommends itself by its usefulness, but must not be measured by any strict standard of truth."\(^\text{15}\) He appreciates that there are alternative means of acquiring knowledge and claims that, in contrast with our worldview which regards the whole as the composite of its parts and relationships, the myth-making consciousness gradually distinguishes separate elements from the originating whole.\(^\text{16}\)

\begin{verbatim}
For in the [mythic] mode, thought does not dispose freely over the data of intuition, in order to relate and compare them to each other, but is captivated and enthralled by the intuition which suddenly confronts it. It comes to rest in the immediate experience; the sensible present is so great that
\end{verbatim}


15 Ibid 8.

16 Ibid 13.
everything else dwindles before it. For a person who is under the spell of this mythico-religious attitude, it is as though the whole world were simply annihilated ... The ego is spending all its energy on this single object, lives in it, loses itself in it. ... we have here an impulse toward concentration; instead of extensive distribution, intensive compression.\(^{17}\)

Note that "ego," in Cassirer's usage, denotes the spirit (or spirit-centred worldview) in contrast to its Freudian designation, where "ego" signifies not a holistic but a separate and individualistic entity. When the experience reaches its point of greatest intensification,"the word which denotes that thought content is not a mere conventional symbol, but it is merged with its object in an indissoluble unity. ... Whatever has been fixed by a name, henceforth is not only real, but is Reality."\(^{18}\)

In "The Fourth Stage", Wole Soyinka speaks about a similar form of perception that occurs in Yoruba funeral rituals wherein words are taken back "to their roots, to their original poetic sources when fusion was total and the movement of words was the very passage of music and the dance of images. Language is still the embryo of thought and music where myth is daily companion, for there language is constantly mythopoetic."\(^{19}\) The European theorist's mythico-religious mode and the African artist's mythopoetic awareness describe a consistent, if not identical, system of perception, and one that is useful for an appreciation of the texts which follow, for a holistic mode of perception is also, as Soyinka suggests, an avenue to altered states of consciousness. Such perceptual modes lead to alternative forms of knowledge which develop, as the anthropologist Barbara Tedlock points

\(^{17}\) Ibid 32-3.

\(^{18}\) Ibid 58.

out, because "some cultures are much more interested in and sophisticated about alternative or altered states of consciousness ... Western analysis of altered states would seem primitive to peoples who have been living with and actively developing these types of consciousness for centuries." A major part of this research has thus been devoted to exploring the concept of alternative forms of consciousness, perception and conceptualisation which Narayan, Farah, Head, Okri and Rushdie shape for their unique purposes. Through their evocations of liminality and mythopoeic consciousness, the writers persuade readers to consider new ways of seeing the world and to appreciate the multi-faceted values inherent in our diverse humanness.

Although framed by Christianity, Veselin Kesich's proposal is instructive in showing that there are two fundamental descriptive means for the evocation of supra-human entities and states which are essentially beyond knowing in the usual sense: the affirmative and negative (apophatic) ways of theology. The affirmative way "uses terms from our own experience to describe God and his qualities", whereas the via negativa claims that "He transcends any concept that we might apply to him." In the processes of evocation, the via negativa becomes a malleable tool, stretching imagination to its limits. A believer in the via negativa, Kesich observes, "engages in a paradoxical search. On the one hand, he or she denies that God can be expressed in words or concepts, on the other hand the seeker must follow the road of the via negativa to be united with the ultimate reality." Worded differently, apophatic conceptual limits create a metaphorical space of paradoxical play in which the supra-human possibility can be imagined. This ability to create something which is beyond conception through paradox and metaphor is vital to fictional art, as are the diverse manifestations of supra-human entities in definable


22 Ibid.
terms. Hinduism and Islam provide excellent examples of the different descriptive concepts to be found in spiritual systems: pluralism as against monotheism; fantastic imagery as against a sacred ban on figurative art; inclusive syncretism as against the one book and language of God. While my analysis is concerned to demonstrate the value of cultural distinctiveness, I also hope to show that diverse spiritual systems can share similar motivations and that Hinduism and Islam, though extrinsically different, are intrinsically alike.

Kesich concludes that the most effective metaphysical concepts employ combinations of both descriptive types. The texts to be discussed, characteristically, manifest gods, spirits and dream figures and also supra-human presences in non-descriptive ways. Further, fiction empowers authors with a form of licence to exploit the two descriptive means: they can exaggerate or destroy more conventional symbolism and play with the "unnamable" by resourcing a variety of technical devices. Since fiction re-arranges the actual world and teases out truths by optional routes, Farah's Deeriye may evoke Allah as the "honey-guide of [his] dreams" and Narayan's Raju can equate the mysteries of holiness with unfinished sentences without causing offence to the relevant authorities and believers. There are limits, which the Rushdie affair over The Satanic Verses illustrates, but, for the most part, fiction writers are able freely to construct puzzles, take narratorial detours and create paradoxical imagery from traditionally established concepts. The unknowable curiously enables the human imagination to create views of the world and a symbolism that endows people with the means to describe, address, praise and even re-enact the presence of the supra-human in human time.

A collection of related ideas, concerning the continuity or maintenance of belief systems, are treated thematically and technically in the narratives. In the religions of the book--Judaism, Christianity and Islam--the sacred texts are taken as symbolic of the endurance of their respective faiths. However, William Graham's Beyond the Written Word reveals the potency of oral and ritual practices in Hinduism's taboo against writing down anything considered to be Vedic and in Islam's maintenance of Arabic as the sacred and only language of the Qur'an. Graham refers to "the degree of sacrality of the Vedic word and its oral traditions of
transmission" which forges an "indissoluble link between the authoritative oral transmission from a qualified teacher and the authoritativeness of one's own 'possession', or appropriation and understanding, of a sacred text."\textsuperscript{23} In a similar vein, Islamic custom established a precise, or perfect, chant form for the "holy reciting," or "recitation," which is precisely what the Arabic word \textit{qur'an} means. The recited words convey "a sacrality felt in often quite visceral fashion by the Muslim who knows it as the sublimely beautiful and untranslatable language of God's perfected revealed word, even if he or she speaks no Arabic."\textsuperscript{24} From a slightly different perspective, Ninian Smart and Richard D. Hecht view religious stability as being reliant on people's relationships with the sacred texts rather than on the sacred authority enshrined in the texts themselves.\textsuperscript{25} Socially relevant authority and the practical engagement of the text in prayer, ritual and recitation are thus the sacred book's lifelines. sacred stories, like any stories, must be retold or the sounds re-uttered for their own sustenance. Therefore, notions of the supra-human can be seen as akin to the storytelling process, initiated in oral traditions and later handed down through the written form, with the proviso that the resultant texts are used in acts of reading and thus are passed into human consciousness. This emphasis on social practice and meaningfulness is germinal to the fiction and writers of my research. Each re-working of supra-human ideas reveals an equal preoccupation with the need to retain contact with the myths of origins and, at the same time, to foster continuity through the adaption of ideas to contemporary situations. Farah and Okri even insert stories within their stories to illustrate how ideas are carried and modified as the narratives pass from one generation to the next. Supra-human ideas are no different: they must be told and felt in order to be maintained in the culture. Fictional re-creations, therefore, contribute to the preservation, if in highly


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid 85.

individualistic ways, of spiritual traditions and transformations.

Frank Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy* points to the ways in which the ambiguous nature of texts provide another means of maintaining spiritual traditions. Kermode begins by examining the Gospel of St Mark's deliberate concealment of God's meaning. Jesus's statement on the secrecy of the Kingdom of God affirms the true existence of that Kingdom but, as Kermode points out, the wording distinguishes between insiders and outsiders with extreme selectivity and excludes the majority of us, under the designation of the non-elect, from any opportunity of attaining true knowledge or the Truth.

To you [the Apostles] has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that they may see but not perceive, and may hear but not understand, lest they should turn again and be forgiven (my emphasis).

Kermode argues that we can divine meanings but never know the truth/s, not only in sacred texts but in all narratives because, in one way or another, they are constructed around enigmas, riddles and "dark sayings". Biblical secrecy is replicated in the Qur'an, where there is ample discussion of the eloquence and clarity of Allah's words alongside authorised ambiguity. For example, Al-Tabari's exegesis makes it clear that some of Allah's sacred revelations are destined to remain inaccessible: "O my God, inspire us with a firm devotion to [this Revelation] so that we may have recourse [only] to its unambiguous parts, while being firm in submission to the obscure parts, [not seeking definitive interpretations for them]." Tradition, in spite


27 St Mark 4.11-12.

of Kermode's pessimistic reading, seems to place trust in that which can never be understood or translated into human terms. Viewed from this angle, secrecy bears a close relationship to the powerful attraction of mystery and ideas of a positive, rather than a negative, absence. The unknowableness of the concept of Allah, for example, and the concealment found in sacred texts generate mystery and a conceptual absence that privilege intuitive and imaginative freedom over formal knowledge. In Narayan and Farah, conceptual absence positively implies that a rationally inconceivable and invisible presence is attainable through mystical and/or poetic intuition.

Closely affiliated to the paradoxical relationship between absence and presence is the place of doubt in issues of belief and, by extension, doubt's influence on narrative validation of spiritual phenomena. As Geddes MacGregor explains, doubt's etymological roots demonstrate that "[t]o doubt means ... to be of two minds". Therefore, in metaphorical contexts, doubt "is not to be equated with unbelief or disbelief but rather with a vacillation between the two opposites: unbelief and belief." Philosophically, "the act of doubting one's existence is an awareness of that existence"; thus, doubt facilitates creative and open thinking and, in so doing, proves to be a predicate of a vigorous, as against a credulous faith. Doubt, as we shall see, is also crucial to Farah's perception of his art, as well as to the Hindu philosophical notion of *māyā* that influences Narayan's ironic vision, and later, doubt virtually shapes the comic method with which Rushdie handles his narrator Saleem's multitudinous ideas. Supra-human issues are, finally, the subject of contemplation rather than of any ultimate or absolute explanation. People cannot explain but they can reflect upon the paradox of humankind's desire to penetrate the essence of all things and our equally potent need to keep the sense of mystery intact.

The healing agency, whether of body, soul or social group, available in a

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30 Ibid.
spiritual system plays a pervasive role in that system’s viability. Using the term "healing" in its broadest sense, I propose that spiritual systems need, by whatever means, to assuage the manifold anxieties encountered by people in their day-to-day existence. Emotional states ranging from love to suffering and the raised consciousness of meditation, dreams and laughter are a few of the ways through which believers attain a sense of physical, emotional or psychic well-being. Through devotion and sacrifice, the distressed makes contact with the deities, spirits or numinous forces and the ensuing communication gives the activities or emotions involved a formidable efficacy. Head’s *A Question of Power* is a striking example of the human potential to heal through a psychic journey into the debilitating intensity of evil. Less dramatically, Narayan’s and Farah’s two holy men can be seen to cure their respective communities: Raju’s sacrificial fasting most probably invokes the rain to end the villagers’ plight and the potential martyrdom of Deeriye’s death arms his people with a potent weapon against the religiously defenceless General. Okri, like Head, is very clear about the need to heal the spirit before social and political problems can be addressed and Rushdie’s antidotes for the disaster of post-independence India are plurality and impurity, tolerance and laughter. Ultimately, while each writer is alert to the socio-political predicaments of their particular environment, their texts celebrate the human spirit’s stubborn belief in transformation. In writing, as Farah observes, "the essential thing is to have this dialogue with the spirit of the experience, with the thing that makes that experience immediate, appealing, something I can express and others are touched by."31 Farah’s use of the term "spirit" suggests a quintessence as well as a soul-like phenomenon within an experience. Rather than being mutually exclusive, the elemental and the religious definitions of "spirit" open out and unify the various levels of experience, ranging from the individual’s inner sense of a soul to the all-pervasive sense of the supra-human. Narayan, Farah, Head, Okri and Rushdie, each in their distinct environments, describe the interconnectedness of phenomena.

across time, space and consciousness in the name of the spirit.
PART ONE: HOLY MEN, SACRIFICE AND MARTYRDOM
II

HOLY MEN, SACRIFICE AND MARTYRDOM
HOLY MEN, SACRIFICE AND MARTYRDOM

For Thou art a celebration and we, with every breath we receive or emit, are mere manifestations of Thy existence.

Nuruddin Farah

Every inch of her body from toe to head rippled and vibrated to the rhythm of this song which lifted the cobra out of its class of an underground reptile into a creature of grace and divinity and an ornament of the gods.

R. K. Narayan

The central protagonists of Narayan's *The Guide*, and Farah's *Close Sesame*, Raju and Deeriye, are two holy men even though they fail to measure up to the more idealised dictionary definitions of holiness. Neither are perfect in righteousness and divine love, nor are they infinitely good, spiritually whole or morally perfect, but Raju and Deeriye are, in one way or another, devoted to their God or to a supra-human consciousness. Farah states and demonstrates Deeriye's devout nature in the opening pages of *Close Sesame*, describing the man's direct engagement with his prayers, wherein "he told his beads in peaceful communication with divine secrets."1 This line in itself holds many of the semiotic marks by which we acknowledge persons as "holy" or "devout": the close proximity of the words "peaceful," "communication" and "divine secrets," together with the concentration and simplicity of Deeriye's behaviour, indicate that Farah, while not identifying himself with Deeriye, treats the old man with deep respect. A combination of word choice, described actions and authorial stance persuades the reader that Deeriye's "holiness" is genuine and is never diminished even by the old man's incursion into politics or forages in self-doubt. Narayan, on the other hand, introduces "holiness" through deception, making the reader aware that Raju's

performance is credible only in describing what is not holy. For the greater part of the novel, therefore, holiness is a performance of disguise. Consequently, Raju's enigmatic movement from the burden of fasting to a changed level of experience could be attributed to the degeneration of his faculties but, contrarily, Narayan persuades the reader that Raju's transformation is an authentic embrace of holiness through the traditional Hindu act of renunciation. Raju allows himself to be re-created in an experiential dimension in which role-playing becomes obsolete and he thereby acquires a place in the community's, and in the reader's perception of him, as a holy guide. The speed of Raju's final enlightenment may be seen in the light of Lord Krishna's advice to Arjuna: "if the greatest sinner worshipped me with all his soul, he must be considered righteous, because of his righteous will." According to this tenet, Raju's righteous will overrides his sinfulness in the culminating stages of the narrative and the swiftness of his conversion, while unorthodox, remains acceptable. Holiness, in other words, is a value accorded by the culture and transmitted through its stories, practices and symbols.

Symbolic networks and motif designs are important factors in each author's rhetorical validation of holiness. Farah, speaking of his art, points out that "the metaphor-based, leitmotiv-based writing ... is also Islamic, because Islam is a very symbol-conscious culture." Thus, Farah's Close Sesame deliberately recalls the Qur'an's layered fabric of meanings and the novel's leitmotif design emanates from the profound creational symbol of breath. In a similar fashion, Narayan adopts the imagery of dance and journeys, māyā's deceptive veil and tropes of guidance from Hinduism's vast reservoir of myths and epics to enhance Raju's improbable path to the spirit. While Farah deals with a monotheistic system and a single sacred text and Narayan handles polytheism and multiple texts, they both employ methods of incorporating and questioning cultural concepts in their portraits of holiness.


Narayan explores the nature of deception and error to intimate that truth, or fusion with the Supreme Being, is found in what is hidden or disguised in normal perception—he follows, in other words, *māyā*’s doctrine "of a mysterious power of self-transformation" which, according to Vedic authors, is the power used by the deities to manifest themselves in different forms. Upaniṣadic texts, seeking a more philosophical approach, conceive the material world as following the processes of creation "but on the higher level of absolute reality the whole world is unreal, an illusion (*māyā*) associated with ignorance (*avidyā*), and Brahman alone really exists."¹⁴ Later theorists suggest that the phenomenal world is not totally illusory but retains "a pragmatic validity for the individual as long as the liberating experience of all-oneness has not been reached. "Illusion" thus implies the mysteriously different not the *nihil*."⁵ In popular contexts, *māyā* is understood as the veiled surface reality which hides the Truth or *Brahman* (or *Śiva*) from human perception. These ideas in which deception is closely associated with the notion of supra-human transformation are fully explored in Narayan's *The Guide*. Farah, on the other hand, retraces the Holy Qur'an's messages and guides Deeriye on a journey across the threshold of death from the limits of earthly life to total presence in, and with, Allah and Nadiifa. Narayan experiments with the masks obscuring human perception while Farah explores the limits of human knowledge.

Textual ambiguity is a major issue for both writers. For Narayan, ambiguity is a natural extension of the flux and multiplicity integral to his cultural environment which, in his hands, becomes marvellous material for comedy. In Farah's case, textual uncertainties seem to derive as much from the Holy Qur'an as from Farah's cognisance of postmodernist theories. As noted in the introduction, the Holy Qur'an, like the Bible, contains sanctioned secrecy, an admission which Farah exploits in relation to his portrayal of twentieth-century Somali life. The incipient secrecy, moreover, acts as a germinal notion for his evocation of supra-humanness


in the novel. Narayan's punctuation and Farah's typography complement the authorial attention given to textual ambiguity. The two technical devices, which appear to arise from personal idiosyncrasies rather than from any identifiable tradition, play major roles in their respective narratives. Furthermore, the punctuation and typography, as used by these writers, signal supra-human ideas. Narayan omits full-stops from Raju's last words, suggesting that death is continuity rather than completion, whereas Farah employs italicisation to highlight the significance of sacred messages which, correspondingly, indicate continuity in an afterlife.

Narayan and Farah both follow clearly demarcated literary, notably oral, traditions; Farah transforms Somali political poetry into prose narratives and Narayan transports epic design into the intimate world of Malgudi's village tales. Said Samatar, in his survey of Somali literature, notes the importance throughout Somali history of the form of "polemical poetry [which takes] the medium of political debate to its highest art form."6 Somalis have syncretised Qur'anic law and nomadic custom in such a way as to overlook the Qur'an's injunction against poetry on the grounds that poetic narratives are profane untruth. Instead, Somali traditions raise the poetic medium to practical and mystical power. Throughout his oeuvre, Farah fuses Somali poetic form and politics and, in Close Sesame, he specifically uses Sayyid Muhammad Abdulle Hassan, the greatest exemplar of Somali nationalism and polemic poetry, to counterpoint Allah and the Qur'an on the one hand, and the General and his rhetoric on the other.

Hinduism, by contrast, places art at the centre of its cohesive system of spiritual, artistic, ethical, political and social concerns. Thereby, Hinduism's holistic position resembles Cassirer's mythico-religious thought, fusing symbols and concepts that western approaches tend to separate. Shri Krishna Sakena, discussing behavioural differences between east and west, claims that all eastern activity is quintessentially religious:

Holy Men, Sacrifice and Martyrdom

Deep down in his soul, the image that an Easterner produces in keenly observant minds is his theocratic response and behaviour which are almost exclusively determined by his religion or idea of the sacred, which remains a structure of his fundamental consciousness.\(^7\)

The poet and his creation, whether operating symbolically or literally, exert a vital influence on the Indian psyche. The world is conceived as a work of art, a poem. Art, in other words, is fundamental to knowledge of divine natures and, in human terms, the poet is the storyteller who transmits the words of the gods through stories that embody all knowledge. The Mahabharata's narrator encapsulates the storyteller's obligation to follow ancestral initiatives:

Poets have told it before, poets are telling it now, other poets shall tell this history on earth in the future. It is indeed a great storehouse of knowledge, rooted in the three worlds, which the twiceborn retain in all its parts and summaries. Fine words adorn it, and usages human and divine.\(^8\)

Narayan's art transposes poetry into an ironic prose that affirms and questions traditional concepts. It is as if Narayan follows an axiom, posited by the stone-cutter in The Vendor of Sweets, in relation to his own creations:

I always remember the story of the dancing figure of Nataraj, which was so perfect that it began a cosmic dance and the town itself shook as if an earthquake had rocked

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it, until a small finger on the figure chipped off. We always do it; no one ever notices it, but we always create a small flaw in every image; it's for safety.⁹

Perfection with protective flaws is an apt metaphor in a Narayan text for the multiplicity and plurality that is India. Ultimately, he delights in the absurdity of human display, even when he intuits that inner transcendence may be the only true value there is.

In the broadest of strokes and consistent with apophatic ideas, supra-human presence in Narayan and Farah emerges from the imaginative processes which are at work within notions of absence. In both instances, the narrator relinquishes his privileged position in Raju's and Deeriye's consciousness; one to assume the vantage point of an observer, the other to fall back on the incomplete communication of rumour. The technical absence places each character's moment of death at a remove which, paradoxically, imbues the passage from life to death with supra-human powers: both characters transcend the phenomenon of death, understood as the end of being, and both act for the well-being of those still living in an earthly sense. From Raju and Deeriye's points of view, sacrifice and martyrdom amount to essentially the same act of submitting their lives to their respective gods. The difference lies in the manner in which death occurs: Raju renounces his life actively through his own volition and means, whereas when Deeriye deliberately endangers his life, he is shot down by the General's bodyguards. Consequently, the act of sacrifice involves no guilt on the part of others in contrast with martyrdom, where guilt is clearly marked for future recrimination. Raju's sacrifice brings on the rains to appease the villager's hunger and Deeriye's death, through the intervention of his prayer beads, is transformed into a symbolic martyrdom, demonstrating that the ordinary Somali can still resist the General's autocratic rule.

Finally in this preamble, I wish to alert the reader to the Indian aesthetics of *rasa*, primarily because of its relevance to Narayan and Rushdie but also because the state of heightened awareness, fundamental to the concept of *rasa*, is a common thread in the various forms of supra-human consciousness raised in the work of all the artists under consideration. Essentially, the Sanskrit aesthetic of *rasa*, roughly translated as "emotive aesthetics," is concerned with the emotional and/or sensory level of shared communication achieved between the creator poet or performer and his or her audience. *Rasa* grapples with moments of consciousness in which the sense of self is totally immersed, as in religious awe or, in literary terms, as in the feeling of deep pleasure described as sublimity. Developed in an environment of oral and performative sophistication, *rasa* has emerged as a highly defined system of aesthetics which grades artistic composition in terms of emotive effectiveness. Like any system that aims to analyse intrinsically non-linguistic experience, the *rasa* has suffered a narrowness through structuration that is not consistent with its conceptual ground. Edwin Gerow's interpretation of the phenomenon illuminates the level of perception involved and, also, suggests a defect in its schematisation when he observes that

> the mysterious transcendence even of the audience's own form of limited or natural consciousness is *rasa*. In it, Rama and Sita are no longer Rama and Sita who manifest love and terror, but love and terror themselves, **not understood, but directly and intuitively perceived**

> ... Intuition is seen as direct apprehension of reality--generalised emotional being, and the only important function of the esthetic work is to enable that apprehension (my emphasis).^{10}

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My disagreement is not with the validity of the transcendent experience but with the specificity of the implicated emotion. For example, although we may be moved to experience terror through an actor's skill, we experience not the essence of terror but the sense of terror at some kind of a remove. If love is the emotion involved, however, the apprehended experience may feel true and wholly immediate. Intensity of experience, I suggest, lies in the deep pleasure derived from a shared emotional communication. This reading concurs with Krishna Chaitanya's description, in his study of The Mahabharata, of the literary function of delight.

Chaitanya explains that Mammata, an eleventh-century writer, thought that "pure, unalloyed delight constitutes the whole being of art". He contends that "[d]elight cannot be created and relished without a desire for it" which, according to this line of thinking, implicates delight in the general desire for social betterment and an increased personal sensitivity common to poets and citizens alike.11 With Chaitanya, we again become conscious of the spiritual dimension permeating the Hindu conceptualisation of art. "The enterprise of growth has to be undertaken from a personal centre, it involves striving by the self and the final relish is relish by the self of an enriched self."12 Side by side, and equally valid as far as I can tell, Gerow's and Chaitanya's approaches represent opposite ends of the rasa continuum; the virtual separation as against the fusion of art and religion. In both perspectives, emotions apprehend some order of knowledge which, more often than not, manifests itself in cosmological imagery and concepts. For my purposes, Chaitanya's notion of delight posits an altered form of consciousness which is crucial to this study. Rasa, under the designation of art, thus constitutes an avenue of numinous or spiritual knowledge.

Knowledge is a phenomenon of wonder and limits within the two texts: Narayan is fully at home with the magnitudes of Hindu cosmology and Farah


12 Ibid.
bases his vision on Allah's promise of sacred wholeness in the afterlife. An ongoing flood of stories is Narayan's source of knowledge, whereas Farah investigates the puzzles of symbolism and language of a single sacred text in order to come to terms with the limits of earthly knowledge. Both intuit the role of verbal uncertainty and puzzlement in the evocation of the supra-human. Informed by cultural concepts, the practice of storytelling, as represented by Close Sesame and The Guide, invokes ancient transitions as the symbolic means to effect some form of healing in their specific communities through acts of sacrifice and martyrdom.
III

A SMALL JOURNEY ACROSS THE COSMIC DANCE:

NARAYAN'S GUIDE BOOK
Every inch of earth ... has a divine association. ... We attain an understanding only when we are aware of the divine and other associations of every piece of ground we tread upon. — R. K. Narayan.

R. K. Narayan introduces Raju, the central protagonist of *The Guide*, at the moment of his release from prison. In contrast with the strict set of rules and regulations dictated by imprisonment, Raju finds freedom lacking in definition and, with nothing better to do, rests in a deserted shrine. This haphazard decision initiates the next stage of his life's journey for, in the landscape of Indian symbolism, the image of a single, poorly dressed man, resident in such a setting, can have but one meaning. When the nascent disciple, villager Velan, arrives on the scene, he claims his holy man and Raju's and his devotees' destinies are set in motion. Concurrently, Raju's confession, interwoven into the fictional present, reveals the history and personality of the man behind the improbable mask of holiness.

The young boy's traditional life-style changes when the railway arrives in Malgudi for Raju takes advantage of the new travelling public and transforms the family food-stuff business into a tourist enterprise. The conversion fits Raju's temperament like a glove, until he accepts a commission from an oddly morose archaeologist (whom Raju labels Marco) and his appealing wife Rosie. Frustrated by her husband's refusal to allow her to dance, Rosie quickly warms to Raju's flattery and before long the guide and the unhappy wife enter into an illicit liaison, leaving Marco to study dancing gods and goddesses in the Peak House cave paintings. Inevitably, the infidelity is revealed and both commission and liaison come to an abrupt end. Rosie, unable to pacify her angry husband, returns and, through Raju's persuasive strategies and Rosie's commitment to the dance, the couple enter into a phase of material fortune buoyed by Rosie's transformation into the highly respectable dance artist, Nalini. Impresario Raju develops a taste for
power and influence and, subsequently, commits petty indiscretions, the most
fateful of which is his forgery of Rosie's signature. Thus, while Marco succeeds in
publishing his book and Rosie reaches the peak of her artistic career, Raju is
unceremoniously thrown into prison. Here, by virtue of his accommodating
personality, Raju adjusts to prisoners' needs and officials' demands with alacrity.

At the same time as this confessional narrative unfolds, the security of Raju's
new-found role as the villagers' swamji is disrupted by drought and subsequent
inter-family squabbles. The fighting threatens to check Raju's regular food supply,
so he sends a message to the villagers warning them that he will not eat unless they
stop quarrelling. Sure enough, the message curtails the fighting, but only because
the dull-witted messenger twists the original directive into the swamji's promise to
fast until the rains arrive. Therein, the villagers' holy man assumes a miraculous
stature and control of the situation passes out of Raju's hands. In the midst of a
carnivalesque crowd, Raju's deceptive fasting becomes fact and the holy man is
seen to renounce his life for the sake of his followers. The elucidation of what
meaning this comedy of errors generates is the objective of the pages that follow.

In the fifty years of critical attention devoted to Narayan's writing, few
commentators have questioned the storyteller's deep concern for humanity or his
sensitive handling of the disjunctions integral to the comic mode. On the other
hand, divergent opinions persist over the extent of traditional Hindu fidelity and
social verisimilitude to be found in his evocation of the trials and tribulations of the
inhabitants of small-town Malgudi. Having published Swami and Friends: A Novel
of Malgudi in 1935, Narayan is one of the first and, now, longest living exponent
of "New English Literatures" to have gained recognition in the contextual
parameters of colonialism; consequently, his encounters with critical attention are
extensive in comparison with most of his counterparts. "Since the death of Evelyn
Waugh," champions Graham Greene, "Narayan is the novelist I most admire in the
English language."1 Greene's praise, acquiescent with colonial assumptions and an

1 Graham Greene, from the backcover of Narayan's The Guide,
imperial paternalism of the 1930's, implies that Narayan's acceptability lies in his anglicisation and his compatibility with the British literary canon. Since that time, the body of commentary tends to describe critical and ethical shifts in analysis as much as it does Narayan and his literature: initially the establishment embraced the child of the Empire; then he is set at odds with the political "writing back" and Marxist social realism of postcolonialism from within and outside his national boundaries; and, in the later stages of postcolonial debate, investigation concentrates on the impressive, non-British literary traditions, both oral and written, which are pertinent to Narayan's culturally-informed literature written in English. Undisturbed by the analytical industry devoted to his work, Narayan spins his tales under the banyan tree of his inheritance wherein he is both sage and sceptic and, finally, a man fraught with the paradoxes in which he abides. Narayan's understated irony exposes inconsistencies to be found in Hindu worldviews and casts an equally discerning eye on the inevitable anomalies arising out of east-west encounters. Whatever the origins and major motivations of Narayan's art, critics commonly acknowledge Narayan's ability to encapsulate existential questions and enigmas in the particularised intimacy and cultural specificity of Malgudi.

**quintessential or qualified hinduism?**

Critics are more and more conscious of Narayan's inseparability from his Hindu heritage though debate continues over the conceptual role that culture plays in his fiction. Edwin Gerow observes that Narayan's art is characteristically "classical," expressing "a genuine formal as well as a contextual continuity with the best efforts of Indian literature."² However, Gerow's conclusion relies on the notion that there are two levels to traditional Indian narratives; the surface action--tasks, problems and complications--and the underlying fate, destiny or truths that eventually reveal the illusory nature of the disordered surface action. Gerow admits

that the pattern applies less to *The Guide*, which was written while Narayan was in Berkeley, because "the characters become involved in one another, their status changes, illicit affairs intervene, despair threatens."\(^3\) I find that there is ample evidence beyond Rosie's and Raju's transformations to argue that the order regained in a Narayan work is an altered, even, as in Raju's case, a transformed order. Similarly concerned with the strong Indian sensibility of Narayan's vision, Jayant Biswal claims that the Hindu perspective

precludes any possibility of tragedy, because man here is safely placed in a cosmic hierarchy with relations extending not only to his fellow men but also to Nature and God, not only in time and space but also beyond time and space. In the scheme of things man is responsible to God as much as God is responsible to man.\(^4\)

The illusory nature of human perception (*Māya*), man's unity with the creative source and the cycle of cause and effect (*Karma*) which links birth to rebirth and social moral codes, all combine to forge a pattern of life that is antithetical to the chance rupture central to tragic genres. Biswal, therefore, concludes that Raju's metamorphosis is Narayan's affirmation of the old values.\(^5\) While Narayan is, in many respects, a traditionalist, he is critical of perspectives that interpret the Hindu worldview as inflexible and fatalistic. On the contrary, his narratives indicate that he is attracted by the unpredictable and inconsistent features of the system. In this respect, William Walsh's observation is instructive in so far as he points to the way in which Narayan's "appreciation of the multiple and dispersed nature of existence" creates a "tension between the one and the many, a sustaining theme of

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3 Ibid.


5 Ibid 23.
Hinduism.6 Thereby, Walsh encapsulates a significant trait in Narayan's work, because this sort of tension is integral to the incongruity which is at the core of his creative nature.

However, along with Gerow's, Biswal's and others' positions on the implacable Hindu pattern, Walsh's insight into the conceptual tensions in Narayan's inheritance fails to take into account the full significance of Narayan's comic irony and his delight in epic inconsistencies. Narayan's passion for human ambivalence in life, as in the sacred texts, informs his storytelling practice and creates twentieth-century novels that maintain an on-going dialogue with the past. For example, Narayan's frequent tributes to illustrious forebears show his fascination with their poetic powers and narratorial tricks:

For me, the special interest in this work is the role the author himself plays in the story. Vyasa not only composed the narrative [or so tradition claims], but being aware of the past and future of all his characters, helps them with solutions when they find they are in a dilemma ... Vyasa's birth itself is explained at the beginning of the epic. He was conceived in a ferry by his virgin mother, who later begot by Santanu the two brothers, the widows of the younger brother becoming pregnant through Vyasa's grace, and giving birth to Dhritarashtra and Pandu, whose sons in turn become the chief figures of The Mahabharata.7


Working from such time-honoured foundations by no means contains Narayan in dogma or format. Instead, he seizes on the joys and problems given in the contradictory nature of cosmic being and re-incorporates them into Malgudi's small sphere. Like Raju's convenient appropriation of holiness, which he justifies at one level as his duty to the community, Narayanesque characters invariably misuse inconsistencies in moral interpretations of texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita, to service their own ends. In the spirit of good humour rather than in acquiescence to fate, Narayan accepts the flawed morality of sacred texts and their resultant human misuse as natural indications of human and supra-human fallibility. The only solution to life's predicaments, offered through his art, is his faith in the beneficial effects of a comic vision that can detect the manifold possibilities available within the human and divine continuum. Thus, while Narayan affirms traditional values, he qualifies their validity through a process of on-going assessment: like stories, wisdom has to be told again and again, for and by the people.

comic irony and love's vision

Narayan's renowned comic irony, with its keen insight into incongruous situations, contradictory behaviours and paradoxical philosophies, is the fruit of a long tradition of aesthetic theory in India, first recorded by Bharata, the Sanskrit drama theorist (c. second century C.E.) and writer of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.\(^8\) Bharata claims that incongruity between ideas or appearances is the essential factor causing the laughter that generates the *rasa* of humour between the performer and his or her audience.\(^9\) There seems, also, to be a correlation between the incongruous elements drawn together in comic situations and the Indian philosophical concept of *māyā*. *Māyā* is the phenomenon that acts like a veil drawn over earthbound consciousness which has the effect of concealing the deeper "reality," consciousness


\(^9\) Ibid 32.
or *Brahman* from human perception. The surface reality that we perceive is, thus, illusory and unreliable. Though *maya* reflects a serious attempt to come to terms with the complexity, variations and scale of Hindu worldviews, *māyā*, through its innate deceptiveness, provides productive material for local humorists. The dialectic between the right manner of being and the deceptions which hide or suppress innate truths that are found in Hinduism's ambiguous morality and conceptualisation are paralleled in Narayan's texts which constantly address the seriousness of the anomalies from an ironic point of view. How can the human mind come to terms with discrepancies which apparently exist between divine moral command and divine trickery? Ideally, the moral role demanded by the gods impose supra-human burdens, such as abstinence, chastity and material renunciation, on mere human beings. Moreover, these divine expectations are potentially illusory because *maya* allows nothing, apart from the godhead, to realise a condition of absolute certainty. From another angle, *māyā* can be seen as a sort of cosmic projection of the human tendency to role-play: humans adopt particular modes of behaviour, not to express an inner essence, but to gain favours or attain prestige in the eyes of gods and humans alike. In other words, the reality which *māya* conceals is analogous to the imperceptible self hidden beneath the disguise of behaviour. What ultimate conditions thus determine human duty in spiritual terms and to what extent is human action accountable to the gods and goddesses? Here Narayan alerts us to Hindu speculations that quickly flounder in conceptual paradox. If God abides within human beings, who in turn abide within God, where can the authorising value be situated? How can the paradox of "Brahman is all, and Brahman is nothing or no-thing" be interpreted in the limits of human actuality? In this discussion, I hope to illustrate how Raju's life moves around moral discrepancies and leaves them bare, yet transitionally serviceable, on his journey towards holiness.

Within the text's ethical debates, Narayan plays with the common view of India's holy men as guides of the spirit. He manipulates the metaphor so that we are constantly aware of a peculiar combination of secular and divine guidance in the series of roles that Raju adopts. Raju guides the fortunes of his father's railway shop, tourists, Rosie's career and prisoners before his fidelity to guidance abruptly turns him into the saviour sadhu of the shrine. Indeed, the constancy of the guidance metaphor manifests the only direct line in Raju's movements hither and thither through the text, generating a narrative structure which suggests Narayan's belief in an intractable destiny. Considering the polarity of comic deception and truth established in the novel, it is more probable that Narayan traps Raju in unthinking disguises till the mask becomes his total substance. Narayan's albeit slight stroke of moral reproach is countered, at the crucial moment, by Raju's response to the inner call of the spirit. Sagging into the drying river, Raju finds release in true duty, which is true action and which, Narayan wryly observes, appears from one angle of vision to be but a paltry act.

Thus, a sense of life's incongruities is a given for descendants of South India's long-established and complex traditions. Nurtured with his fellow students on the epic oral literatures of Tamil and Sanskrit, the young Narayan acquired an even sharper perspective on the disparities between knowledge and experience when he came face to face with "A for Apple Pie" on the opening page of his first English reader. Later, the adult Narayan, now a master craftsman of the foreign language, reminisces: "We were left to guess, each according to his capacity, at the quality, shape, and details, of the civilisation portrayed in our class books."\(^{11}\) Narayan's creativity is imbued with a sense of absurdity, as if in obedience to those lessons laid down by Lord Macaulay on that lambent child mind with the incongruous "A for Apple Pie" in focus. Imagination, habituated "to accept without surprise characters of godly or demoniac proportions with actions and reactions set

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in limitless worlds and progressing through an incalculable time-scale," found little unusual in the mystery, except that the "Apple Pie" puzzle must have appeared somewhat bland by comparison. The quizzical angle of vision in which mythology coalesced with pragmatism, however, proved auspicious for the man who bore the boy's delight and puzzlement into gentle maturity.

Narayan's response to the incongruity of the culturally insensitive "A for Apple" exercise illustrates his respect for multiplicity and absurdity by way of a comic tolerance that criticises but, finally, rejoices in life's innumerable contradictions. Take, for example, an incident from The Guide in which Narayan describes Velan's reaction to Raju's false wisdom: "Velan patiently waited for the continuation. He was the stuff disciples are made of; an unfinished story or an incomplete moral never bothered him, it was all in the scheme of life." The disjuncture between the given and the received is a joke, an ironic dig at deception trading with the gullible. At the same time, the comment provides insight into the way in which irrationality, in this instance an incomplete utterance, may be a valid path towards supra-human experience. Fakrul Alam raises a further possibility about Velan's attitude to unfinished stories when he asks:

is Narayan using [Velan's response] to prepare us for the ending he provides for The Guide? In other words, is the conclusion of the novel, where Raju may or may not be at the point of achieving transcendence, deliberately left open-ended by Narayan because "it was all in the scheme of life"?

12 Ibid 122.


I would suggest that Narayan's irony works to this end throughout the novel, though this particular scene clearly foreshadows Raju's parting performance. Hence, one aspect of the supra-human which informs Narayan's work is this grasp of paradoxical and incongruous material; an experience of psychic love is the other.

In My Days, which reiterates the highly autobiographical aspects of The English Teacher, Narayan touches on the process through which he overcame the shock of his wife's sudden death. In the presence of a medium, Narayan communicated psychically with his beloved Rajam and gradually learned, through her healing presence, to regain his earthly courage. The communication marked his perception, as he himself explains:

Out of this experience a view of personality or self or soul developed which has remained with me ever since ... The full view of a personality would extend from the infant curled up in the womb and before it, and beyond it, and ahead of it, into infinity. Our normal view is limited to a physical perception in a condition restricted in time, like the flashing of a torchlight on a spot, the rest of the area being in darkness.15

Personality, the external evidence of self or soul, is consequently an immeasurable phenomenon that only love can penetrate to a certain degree, whether this be love of another soul, devotion to the gods or love of the other perpetrator of time and place, storytelling. Thus Narayan's work manifests two abiding supra-human values that are generic to his culture: the paradoxical and incongruous play of appearances and a belief in the ability of love to transcend earth-bound blindness.

about matters such as the mysterious continuity of the human personality inherent in the notion of reincarnation.

**points of departure: sainthood, journeys and voices**

What, then, are the first steps taken by the storyteller along the Hindu journey, which is *The Guide*? Narayan's idea of a story's germination appears in this extract discussing *The Ramayana*'s source: "Each tale invariably starts off when an inquiring mind asks of an enlightened one a fundamental question. The substance of the story of *The Ramayana* was narrated by the sage Narada when Valmiki (who later composed the epic) asked, 'Who is a perfect man?'"\(^\text{16}\) What question, or questions, lie at the centre of *The Guide*? According to Narayan, the germinial idea emerged from a local Mysore council's solution to the state of drought in the province. The council organised Brahmins to pray for rain which duly arrived on the twelfth day of disciplined devotions and, at an invisible remove, set Narayan's mind turning over the idea of "some suffering enforced sainthood."\(^\text{17}\) That Narayan crafts his tale around an actual event is analytically significant, since it establishes apparent mystical incongruence on a matter-of-fact level of experience. This point becomes even more significant in the light of the hidden influence of Mahatma Gandhi in the shaping of Raju's portrait. From recently released manuscripts and letters, Michel Pousse has discovered that Narayan had intended to write a biography of Gandhi. Indeed, Narayan's unpublished introduction to *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the novel directly preceding *The Guide*, explains that in the process of research he realised that

> "here was one of classical stature, too grand for mere factual narration, whose stature could not be cramped into a mere factual narration whose outlines were grown into


legendary in dimension and values and could be presented with veracity through a fiction ... The story developed with M.G, like a god, keeping an eye on [Bharati's and Sriram's] fortunes."

Thus, Gandhiji appears as a passing force in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Critically, the novel is said to suffer from the seriousness of its central, if displaced protagonist but the novel is, nonetheless, a valid exploration within the Malgudi backwaters of reactions to the presence of a singularly holy person in the community. Narayan's treatment of Raju in *The Guide*, by contrast, turns its prime focus on the embodiment of holiness itself, questioning its expression, acceptance and ultimate reality through Raju's performances. It is as if Narayan continues to pursue through the frame of the Mysore incident the means to convey the "god-like" personality in a human form which, ironically, is actualised through that which is ostensibly unholy. However, Narayan's thoughts on the notion of a suffering which provokes sainthood raises an anomaly with respect to his text, because neither Raju nor the starving villagers are portrayed with the degree of emotion usually associated with suffering. This response to the degree of suffering portrayed may well betray a trans-cultural lens on my part or, more plausibly, the muted emotion may be an innate feature of Narayan's understated ironic art. The villagers are clearly afflicted by hardship, but the situation draws them into irrational quarrels and bizarre discoveries rather than to suffering *per se*. Texts often deviate from their author's motives, a phenomenon which Narayan himself recognises in the context of Valmiki's *Ramayana*: "The characters, as they would in any perfect work of art, got out of control. Valmiki let them act in their own way, watched the conclusions as an outsider, and returned to his life of contemplation." It seems reasonable to apply a similar relationship to Narayan and his Malgudians.


Since sainthood is enforced on Raju, one might peruse the narrative for signs of genuine holiness and supra-human guidance within the series of deceptive performances that constitute Raju's life-journey, before genuine consciousness or "being" is attained through his sacrifice on behalf of the villagers. In his article, "Moksha for Raju: The Archetypal Four-stage Journey," Viney Kirpal demonstrates how Raju's life parallels "the archetypal journey of every Hindu towards salvation" through the ordained stages of student, householder, recluse and ascetic. The first stage involves situations that lead to learning and corresponds, not so much to Raju's formal education, but to the skills which he acquires while improving his business acumen, whether at the railway shop or in his tourist exploits. The meeting with Rosie propels Raju into a phase of attachment which deviates from prescriptive familial rules but, nonetheless, manifests "the individual's yearning for karma or love and his quest for artha or material possession" that is characteristic of the householder stage. Kirpal argues that as Nalini's manager, Raju pursues material gains so excessively that his dark passions "find free play in him" and cause him to commit a forgery which, in turn, pushes him over the threshold to the third stage, prison. Removed from society, Raju begins "the transformation ... from a worldly, materialistic person to a more non-worldly, non-materialistic one" since he cheers the other prisoners with "stories and philosophies and what not" and contains himself contentedly within a minimalist life-style.

On this point, I would differ with Kirpal because narrator Raju persists in describing himself in theatrical metaphors, such as "I was master of the show," which correlate with the alternative narrator's deliberate focus on Raju's acts of conscious deception toward Velan and friends. Although Raju is officially a recluse who is dismissive of material possessions while in prison and at the shrine, his inner preoccupations continue to centre on his dependence on food and company until the point wherein hunger forces him to concentrate on eradicating

21 Ibid 358.
Kirpal, similarly, cites this moment as Raju's entrance to the ascetic phase proper, a transition which resonates with portents of a sainthood to come. The transition, however, remains subject to Narayan's irony so that while the effort to fast injects Raju with a newfound energy, the rhythmic repetition of the chant makes the world become "blank." Raju, therefore, conforms to tradition but Narayan, with his meticulous word usage, sustains in the term "blank" an uneasy feeling of falsity or foolishness in the procedure. Therefore, while Kirpal's archetypal journey is illuminating, too tight an analogy between the theoretical Hindu journey and Raju's life tends to ignore the constant oscillations in meaning provoked by Narayan's irony. Narayan measures Raju's inept development against the Hindu archetype in order to stress the fuzzy demarcations inherent in Raju's story and in Hinduism's idealised, staged journey. The comparison between theory and practice highlights Raju's violations and reversals of orthodox practice or, from the other perspective, reveals orthodoxy's inability to explicate fully the incongruence that is Raju, and by extension, human nature in general. Variations, encountered in Raju's journey towards holiness, are the very substance of The Guide.

Raju, the guide and subject under Narayan's lens, also assumes the storyteller's role, ostensibly to rectify the erroneous ideas which his performance as a holy man has provoked in Velan's and the villagers' minds. The act of confession occurs at the novel's mid-point, when Raju is confronted with the community's expectation that he fast to bring on the rains. Shaken by the thought that his false persona has hampered him with such an impossible task, Raju whispers in Velan's ear: "I am not a saint, Velan, I'm just an ordinary being like everyone else. Listen to my story. You will know it yourself" (98). For the reader, however, Raju's story begins almost simultaneously with that of Narayan's omniscient narrator whose tale covers the events taking place at the shrine and constitutes the framing perspective for Raju's journey. With a structural sleight of hand, Narayan simply inserts Raju's complaint, "My troubles would not have started" (7), and thus pre-empts the storytelling act which is yet to occur. From the beginning, then, the text contains
two narratorial voices: the present predicament at the shrine is recounted by the omniscient narrator while Raju divulges the major events of his life story, prior to his arrival at the shrine. As K. Venkata Reddy observes, "the novelist's clock is made to tell different times simultaneously and the reader apprehends the complete pattern that signifies each queer detail and connects it to the whole." However, both points of view are, in some measure, limited, firstly, because Raju's perspective is naturally egocentric and, secondly, because in the context of Narayan's belief in personality, Raju's singular tale is but a few moves in the existential possibilities presented by the culture's all-time-embracing myth-scapes. Despite such limitations, the interwoven narratorial tracks provide a significant glimpse of the greater design, rather like the pattern of human time that is created while Brahma blinks. Thus, side by side with Narayan, Raju plays his part in the storytelling process, which enables Narayan to use his protagonist as the linchpin of another thematic development dependent on a Hindu concept, the symbolism of dance.

**the cosmic dance**

In one sense, Raju's story arranges aspects of life into categories, identifying Rosie as the dancer, Marco as the art historian and Raju as the word artist and impresario of profit, whether for sexual or material advantage. At the same time, the holiness debate within the framing narrative infects the worldly events of Raju's journey which enables Narayan to draw the strands of art and work, philosophy and spirituality, together in one paradoxical but vibrant experience. The interwoven categories reflect the basic Hindu concept of unity in diversity. On a more particular level, Balbir Singh develops a parallel between dance and yogi meditation as alternative ways of attaining a union with the Universal Spirit and, thus, views Raju's conversion as a natural progression from Rosie's transcendental dance. The Hindu consciousness that Singh brings to analyses of The Guide is

instructive, firstly, because he identifies spirituality in terms of consciousness and, secondly, for the significance he attributes to Rosie's dance. Using the concept of rasa, he explains art as a representation of life which reflects a coordination between man's inner urges and the evolutionary tendency in man and nature. While reflecting on these phenomena an artist perceives the self of all beings in his own being and becomes an image of absolute consciousness ... In giving an aesthetic expression to the creativity of the universe, an artist's self becomes identical with that of God and partakes of God's immortality.

Dance is a consummate metaphor for an artist's union with God. The evanescent beauty and sensory immersion in life of a dancer's movements suggest the manifestation of an extraordinary presence or a glimpse of God. I believe that Hinduism has seized on that experiential fact to develop, through time, the image of Shiva, the arch yogi, who is also Nataraja, "King of Dancers." John Rothfork further points out that Rosie's bronze figurine of Nataraja "whose primal dance created the vibrations that set the world in motion" (107) is also known as the "Inner Guide." Gestures "precipitate the cosmic illusion; (and) produce ... the continuous creation-destruction of the universe." Like poetry, dance ranks among the most significant metaphors of the culture and, in Narayan's contexts, reinforces the metaphorical and metaphysical network established between his performance


25 Balbir Singh, 37.
and guidance themes. Dance "induces realisation of one's own secret nature through the concentration of psychic energies and gives expression to the meaning of existence." Thus dance is, concurrently, an expression of supra-humanness and devotion to that supra-human being or consciousness. Rosie, though alone in performance, is joined by an audience receptive to the profound emotional vibrations of rasa; together they re-enact their sanctity. Furthermore, Rosie attains a magnetism in transcendence, in spite of the entertainment superstructure which Raju has engineered around dance's sacred properties, suggesting that truth, or perhaps self-truth, will prevail.

Suresh Raichura extends the novel's sense of movement into a symbolic network that includes "other kinetic or motile images of closing and opening of doors," the railway's comings and goings, imagery of ascent or descent, taxiing up and down to Peak House, Marco diving with helmet into the archaeological past, rising, falling, or earthier images of eating. The symbolism fills the novel's design with the resonances, colours and dynamism of Narayan's multifarious meanings. For analytical purposes, a reduction of the motif scheme to its roots illuminates the depth of Narayan's controlled design. On one side, there are the motifs of action, work, duty and travelling and, on the other side, performance, role playing, dance and creative activity are inter-related. Significantly, this division narrows into two main streams of Hindu symbolism; journeys through stages of consciousness and Shiva's creational dance. In turn, consciousness and creational dance break down into the elemental premise that movement and its corresponding acts of participation constitute the primary signs of life--literally, "the whole cosmos is Shiva's body." Eakambaram remarks that "the image of Nataraja [Shiva] is not...

26 Ibid.


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a mere artefact but a God who signifies cosmic dance. It is a myth that enlarges the
dimension of art and thereby multiplies meanings endlessly, of course, within the
parameters of a particular tradition. Therefore, while Narayan's art makes much
fun of paradox and incongruity in cosmic contexts, he also reinforces the
symmetrical elegance of Hindu symbolism through the metaphorical design of his
narrative.

Nalini's snake-dance is a lineal transposition of the potential of dance in
everyday human existence, whereas the choreographic design which grows out of
the motifs in Narayan's deceptively slight novel re-creates the vast and multi-
dimensional canvasses of his heritage. Krishna Chaitanya's description of The
Mahabharata may clarify my suggestion that the cosmos resides in Malgudi too,
because, above all else, Indians are habituated to the patterns of cosmological
simultaneity:

Vyasa's poem was meant to be a transcription of reality,
including earth and heaven, the temporal and the
transcendental. In his view of this total reality, deity
created the world both as play, because he was compelled
by no need, and as a serious enterprise, because he has
ever to work for sustaining it. He created men with
autonomy and freedom and told them that they could
attain a state of similar functioning with himself, that is,
relish the world as a sport or an object of art. But the rules
of the game were strict: the world had to be sustained and
here man had to work as a partner with deity; man had to
be activist and relisher at the same time.30

29 Eakambaram, 79.

30 Krishna Chaitanya, The Mahabharata: A Literary Study, New Delhi,
The combination of activist and relisher is further instructive for its differentiation between work and imaginative involvement leads again to the metaphorical scheme of duty and *rasa*, even physical duty and emotion. It could be said that duty and emotion form a basic dualism in Rosie and Raju's personalities. Rosie achieves transformation when her sense of duty, regarding a faithful interpretation of the high art of *Bharat Natya*, and her love for Raju become as if one in her total emersion in the spirit of her art. Similarly, when Raju's love for Rosie is superseded by a love given to the community, his duty-bound feelings towards his guidance activities become, in the act of self-renunciation, utter devotion to *brahman*. Metaphorically, the dualism of the human personality is transformed into the unified oneness of supra-human being.

To augment the fluidity of transcendental and cosmic dance imagery and maintain a sense of Indian social tensions, Narayan identifies Rosie with snakes. In his efforts to entertain the woman of his dreams, Raju leads Rosie to a village where they witness a cobra dance. Raju is repelled by the whole scene, but Rosie simulates the cobra's swaying motion and watches "with the raptest attention" (58). Allusions to cobras in Marco's caves bring Rosie's dance and Marco's study of ancient paintings together in a transitory engagement that indicates a possible rapport between the estranged couple, even though this occurs under the shadow of betrayal (128). Later, Raju's mother accuses Rosie of being "a real snake woman," a condemnation which contrasts with the final triumph of Nalini's snake dance and reinforces the inherent contradictions found in snake symbolism. On one level, Narayan presents a straightforward relationship between biological snakes' sinuous movement and the dangers inherent in their purportedly venomous natures and, on another level, there are the mythological connections with the snakes in Shiva's hair, the goddess and controller of snakes, Manasa, and with the Naga snake cults. Shiva's prestige is counteracted by goddess Manasa's ambivalence and the Naga cults' identification with South India's lower classes. Moreover, although Manasa is said to remove dangerous poisons, she and her symbolic progeny nonetheless possess equivocal natures. Hence, the cosmic
landscape duplicates that of earth: snakes reflect a dichotomy of beauty and benevolence alongside unstable treachery and, at the same time, bring into focus the rigid laws controlling class-consciousness that Rosie strives to surmount. Seen from an angle of class antagonism, Rosie's life describes the efforts undertaken to rise above the stigma of a family line of temple dancers who are regarded as prostitutes by members of the higher social castes. When her mother attempts to side-step tradition through Rosie's education and marriage to Marco, her endeavours, ironically, inhibit her daughter's natural affinity to dance. The *Bharat Natya*, which Rosie finally masters, is a social function of the Brahmin caste, even if the dancer of the art form is not legitimately of that status. Consequently, when Raju's mother talks of the snake woman, she speaks of the temple prostitutes and thus is at cross-purposes with the snake dance of high art in which Rosie eventually proves herself. In identifying Rosie with snakes, Narayan therein empowers his dance motif to comment on divisions in Indian society and, moreover, to achieve that "transcription of reality, including earth and heaven, the temporal and the transcendental" which Chaitanya ascribes to Vyasa. Identification with snakes apart, Rosie, like Narayan's other protagonists, is multi-functional with respect to the novel's themes, for, over and above being Marco's former wife, the lover, temptress and dancer, Rosie has a comedy role to fulfil.

**the guide performs**

Being a comic progress in two narratorial voices, *The Guide* embraces two principal foils or "straight-persons" as sounding boards to gauge the errors of Raju's desires and deceptions. Chronologically, Rosie, the submissive yet dissatisfied wife of Raju's employer Marco, is the first foil who outshines Raju's performance. Velan, the villager and second foil, exemplifies an extreme simplicity which is but the plain face of truth and thereby the antithesis of Raju's masked behaviour. Both inadvertently cross Raju's path, bearing superficial troubles that belie deep-seated needs: Rosie's frustration with Marco's insouciant arrogance hides a desire for self-

31 Ibid.
realisation through dance, while Velan, beset with his young sister's marriage predicament, embodies the need for practical and spiritual guidance. Against Raju's inconsistency, aimlessness and, often, wrong-headedness, Rosie and Velan demonstrate relatively direct lines of access to revelation through dance and discipleship. Here, in yet another way, Narayan plays with deception, channelling art and spirituality into separate bodies in time, until the veil is pulled away and Rosie and Velan fuse in the same, even if differently realised, act of revelation. In retrospect, Rosie/Nalini’s snake dance achieves equal import with Raju’s renunciation while Velan’s loyalty, under another splendid strike of irony, reverses the guiding role. More than guiding Raju physically through his final hours, Velan’s response to Raju’s confession finally nails Raju to the role of the holy man: “Every respectful word that this man employed pierced Raju like a shaft. ‘He will not leave me alone,’ Raju thought with resignation. ‘This man will finish me before I know where I am’” (208). The inveterate guide follows the bidding of human need.

Service or duty to others pervades critical interpretations of Raju’s “guiding” roles, which variously comply with Walsh’s view that as “a projection of his audience, he was a great success”32 and, so much so, that Raju is unable “not to play up to the role assigned him by somebody else.”33 Furthermore, Walsh points out that such an extreme “degree of accommodation means that Raju’s sincerity consists in being false, and his positive existence in being a vacancy filled by others.”34 Meenakshi Mukherjee, alternatively, interprets Raju’s roles as “a series of improvisations” which are enacted so competently that “the act becomes the reality” and facilitates moments “in which an individual acquires the power to go beyond


33 Ibid 139.

34 Ibid 142.
his self." In this way, Raju's story "is the created object transcending its creator," although, as Mukherjee makes clear, determining whether it is the villager's blind faith or the instinctive wisdom of a man who comprehends the quality of his faith remains problematic. Another metaphorical evocation of the created transcending its creator is Biswal's "mask [that] has outgrown the man." In all three cases, explications of Raju's behaviour depend on performance metaphors, be it role-playing, improvisation or masks, which emanate directly from textual motifs, as the following selections indicate:

"He felt like an actor who was always expected to utter the right sentence" (11);
"he must play the role that Velan had given him" (28);
"Malgudi and its surroundings were my special show" (52);
"It was a world of showmanship" (163);
"He presented my case as a sort of comedy in three acts" (199).

Performance is more than a medium of skilled deceit; its ancient ritual roots endow performance with extraordinary potential, even if its basic communal exchange is motivated by educative, celebratory or merely entertainment ends. In the Indian context, performance, as formerly noted in discussions on dance, is a potent creational image which, in day-to-day practice, acts as a means to rasa or communion with eternal consciousness. Given Narayan's moral expansiveness, his juxtaposition of guidance and performance forms a coherent metaphorical paradigm. This paradigm acts as a useful tool with which to analyse the continuum that exists between veracity and deceit. Apart from the critical attention given to


36 Ibid 129.

37 Biswal, 94.
Raju's practical guidance at the beginning of Rosie's Nalini career, little commentary has been devoted to other nuances found in the metaphorical paradigm of guidance and performance: a guide often functions as a leader in human affairs, acts of disguise may be the means for beneficial concealment and the performance aspects of servitude to others can simply generate delight.

Narayan's irony seeds the narrative with a complex of options, which is not unlike poetry's capacity to invest multiple meanings in a single image. Thus, irony is a compact rhetorical trope which can convey a selection of alternative possibilities faster than can analytical modes. While positive features of Raju's adventures in guidance and performance are here identified, it must be remembered that they have no value except in relation to counter-movements, whose dubious motivations constantly enmesh Raju's morality in absurdity. Leadership qualities, albeit muted, play their part in most of the relationships that Raju forms along the way. In partnership with Rosie, Raju is instrumental in restoring the art of Bharat Natya to its former prominence and vitality and, in a strictly ironic tone, he leads Marco to the caves which become the seminal artefacts in Marco's archaeological research. Consequently, Raju can be seen as a prime mover in the art world. In prison, his cheerful stoicism appears to relieve the depressing aspects of the inmates' lives and this constructive tendency develops, at the shrine, into Raju's inauguration of a school for the children and a counselling service for the adults. Arguably, the sum of good works is but a reflection of desires projected onto him by others but, nonetheless, even if only in compliance, Raju is involved in significant improvements at various levels of community life.

The term "deception" indicates a misleading and immoral falsehood, whereas "disguise" suggests some sort of well-meaning concealment. Raju's behaviour exhibits a mild form of deception together with an ingenuous attraction to the masking game wherein, much like the proverbial showman or theatrical "ham", Raju is always loathe to leave centre stage. But perhaps there is a deeper side to Raju's disguises whereby Narayan parodies, through understatement, the transformations found in the epics. When Rama's arrow pierces Ravana in The
Ramayana, the arch-villain is transformed:

Now one noticed Ravana's face aglow with a new quality. Rama's arrows had burnt off the layers of dross, the anger, conceit, cruelty, lust and egotism which had encrusted his real self, and now his personality came through in its pristine form--of one who was devout and capable of tremendous attainments. His constant meditation on Rama, although as an adversary, now seemed to bear fruit, as his face shone with serenity and peace. 38

Layers of dross do indeed appear to fall from Raju, at least from the reader's point of view, in his submission to the greater reality or, in parody of Ravana's salvation, Raju's character at last becomes identical with his disguise. Moreover, beneath Raju's display of the right manner of being, there lies the ponderous issue of the concealed nature of holiness. Who can say what the appearance or mayā of a Raju might obscure? It is as if Narayan intimates that there are hidden powers in the confusion effected by uncertainties.

Raju's service and leadership go hand in hand because he works in mediums of persuasion and mild coercion rather than through outright command or didacticism. Amidst the villagers he quickly comprehends that the "essence of sainthood seemed to lie in one's ability to utter mystifying statements" while simultaneously the omniscient narrator's aside cuts such wisdom short with his comment that Raju "was dragging those innocent men deeper and deeper into the bog of unclear thoughts" (44). This brief extract illustrates Narayan's ability to gather in a few simple words contradictory levels of experience such as laughter, rational deduction and mysticism. Instead of separating truth and untruth, Narayan constructs an enigmatic paradigm wherein truth and untruth are treated as being equally moral. Consequently, while the unsettled value system fosters the

38 Narayan, The Ramayana, 159.
relationship between Raju and the villagers, Narayan subtextually validates contradictions which pre-empt the novel's denouement. I will explore the transcendental nature of Raju's performance more fully in "Exits and Entrance"; suffice it here to say that, through his resourcefulness, he foreshadows his final role at most stages of his journey. He outclasses his father in business acumen; excels, by Malgudi standards, in his tourist enterprises; shares credit for a successful artistic venture; works against the debilitation of prison life; and, finally, allows the villagers their faith. Reversals of fortune, mistakes and possessiveness notwithstanding, Raju's various performances succeed if only temporarily. At the same time, he is a prototypical Narayanesque character, an urban warrior or "upstart" who feels that the world owes him a living but conceals his attitude under a guise of service to the world. On the testing ground of possibility, Raju wins and loses much before the final ultimatum is given on the battleground of the spirit.

Unquestionably, Raju delights his unconventional audiences and transports them through a range of emotional responses, whether this be in the form of his father's pride over Raju's boyish devotional mimicry or in the comfort and strength that his saintly manoeuvres provoke in Velan and company. Kirpal points to Raju's "one enviable rare quality ... and that is the need to reach out to people, to give them pleasure, to make them happy, to place their interests above his own." Performing to please is fundamental to Raju, even if he repeatedly misconstrues relationships or builds divisive walls where open space would be more conducive to his intuitive desires. His efforts to please the growing stream of tourists separate Raju from his railway business and eventually entangle him in litigation with former friends. The resultant downward moral spiral is duplicated to a catastrophic degree in the events generated by his infatuation with Rosie. The illicit liaison triggers his employer Marco's departure and later precipitates Raju's mother's exodus from her


40 Kirpal, 361.
home. Traditional rules of propriety will not tolerate marital indiscretions wherein a man lives with somebody else’s wife. Not all fault lies with Raju, because his mother’s intransigence on traditional morality and social appearances play their part, as does Rosie’s modern solution to her predicament. Once the relationship with Rosie develops into a full-blown artistic enterprise, Rosie paradoxically works towards perfecting her art, while Raju jeopardises their intimacy by his excessive monopoly over her social movements—“I liked to keep her in a citadel” (171)—and by his manipulative business and political pursuits. In other words, innocent motives are invariably tainted by Raju’s own misreading of the situations.

Despite the frenzied surface activity at this stage in Raju’s history, Narayan’s irony, like a penetrating light, exposes Raju’s moral torpor and corruption. In contrast, Rosie’s integrity deepens as she comes to terms with her art and Raju’s confused histrionics. Without addressing the issue directly, since it would be out of narratorial character, Raju’s commentary alludes to Rosie’s changing relationship to her dancing wherein self-preoccupied desires change into a quest for the spiritual and emotional dimensions available in the traditional skills of the Bharat Natya. Unlike Rosie, Raju submits to the materialistic seductions of performance and consequently, until the night of his arrest, he treats Rosie’s dancing as a commodity with a high market value. In the meantime, Raju’s misguided efforts to ignore Marco’s existence lead him to conceal all mention of the man and his work, a deceit which culminates in the forgery of Rosie’s signature on a legal, if unimportant document. Raju’s arrest, or downfall, coincides with Rosie’s ascent into artistic purity; the snake woman that Raju’s mother had spurned now transcends caste and communicates with gods and humanity simultaneously.

Lights changed, she gradually sank to the floor, the music became slower and slower, the refrain urged the snake to dance—the snake that resided on the locks of Shiva himself, on the wrist of his spouse, Parvathi, and in the ever radiant home of the gods in Kailas. This was a song
that elevated the serpent and brought out its mystic quality, the rhythm was hypnotic. It was her masterpiece (188).

In a sense, Raju launches Nalini's career and thus enables Rosie to travel to self-discovery. Therefore, in the context of the veracity-deceit continuum, the genuine guide of deceptive performances provides the environment in which true performance is realised. Anomalies proliferate out of the text's metaphorical fertility, such that, as Rosie attains contact with the deep sense of community, Raju is stripped, momentarily, of all vestiges of human contact. At the time of his incarceration, Raju has lost touch with his business confidants, his mother, family, friends and his lover. He is reduced to "excessive self-pity that ... one needed all that amount of devilry to keep oneself afloat" (195), and such a devilry in comic exaggeration lays bare the deceit in Raju's most fake and hurtful performance:

Why should she cry? She was not on the threshold of a prison. She had not been the one who had run hither and thither creating glamour and a public for a dancer; it was not she who had been fiendishly trapped by a half-forgotten man like Marco--an apparent gazer at cave paintings, but actually venomous and vindictive, like a cobra lying in wait for its victim (194).

The reader sees through the words to the true sufferer of that moment, Rosie.

Prison, however, proves not to be a debilitating experience for the irrepressible performer but, instead, another theatre of success in which Raju plays both morally defensible and false roles. On one side, his ebullient energy lightens fellow prisoners' depression which together with his stories and fragments of philosophy establish his reputation as a teacher though not, it might be said, without an accompanying ironic barb. At the same time, Raju fawns good-
naturedly before the officials. In Raju's narration, he rates himself as a model prisoner, but considering his bias and Narayan's restless irony, the petty jealousies noted towards Rosie and Mani are possibly the most truthful admissions of that period.

Concurrently, the framing activity on the shrine's stage fuses truth and untruth in a single role. Raju's "old habit of affording guidance" (6) soon gains him the stature of a saint. The situation proves to be mutually beneficial: Raju needs food, shelter and an audience while Velan and villagers yearn for spiritual guidance and tangible signs of divine presence. However, when the drought worsens and Raju's message of non-violence is distorted by a "semi-moronic" boy, the promise to fast matches Velan's immoveable faith and forces Raju's performance into an impasse. He is left with no option but to make artifice into genuine substance and to proceed with the perilous fast. At this point Narayan diverts the narrative focus to the anomalous performance of the gathering crowds. Newspaper correspondents, government commissions, picnicking families, shops, the Tea Propaganda Board, the Health Department spraying DDT, movies, gambling booths and the "pink" television producer from America, collectively constitute a marvellous display of comic exuberance in which incongruence plays the leading role. In fact, Narayan's portrayal of the erratic crowd overpowers the scene and reverses performer and audience roles. Raju the holy man gradually becomes a stillness and an absence that paradoxically acts as the audience to the clamorous entertainment.

exits and entrance

The Guide's final scene places Raju, alone in the strict discipline of the fast, against a chaotic human crowd which, by virtue of the extreme contrast, directs the reader's attention to the incongruous power of simplicity. In the Narayan-Hindu context, the most simple act becomes sanctity's most eloquent expression, just as the con man only achieves sainthood when Raju becomes silent. When Britta Olinder claims that a convergence of oppositional forces is typical of Narayan's
technique, she refers to the author's description of Raju himself. Nonetheless, her observations equally apply to the contrast which Narayan constructs between the multitudinous crowds and the single devotee. When Narayan

reaches the point of deepest mysticism he is also most graphically concrete and realistic, even derogatory in his description. It is as if the two extremes supported each other. There is a complete fusion between realistic description and insights into the mystical powers in human life.\(^\text{41}\)

While Olinder's interpretation describes the incongruity in Narayan's unorthodox treatment of the sacred and the profane, she addresses but one level of the complex action involved in Raju's final moments. Crucial, both technically and emotionally, to the supra-human presence realised in this scene is the withdrawal of narratorial privilege. Unobtrusively, the narrator slips out of Raju's consciousness with the following words: "The hum of humanity around was increasing. His awareness of his surroundings was gradually lessening in a sort of inverse proportion. He was not aware of it, but the world was beginning to press around" (212-3). More than an astute psychological move, Narayan's decision to deny himself his former access to Raju's consciousness corresponds to the Hindu belief that humankind's divine nature is discovered by release, wherein reality and illusion coalesce in the consciousness of one's proper form. Narayan thus releases Raju to the supra-human space which human language can only describe as absence; that paradoxical arena which is replete with irrational presence. Paradox is inextricably part of Narayan's culture, but more significantly, paradox, as I have argued previously, enables the human impulse towards explanation to co-exist with an equally pressing need to keep a sense of mystery intact within these

explanations. If Narayan had affirmed Raju's holiness outright, he would have blocked our imaginative contact with the idea of sacredness and thus denied his readers intimations of the numinous wherein Raju joins the cosmic dance.

Over and above maintaining a metaphorical alliance with absence and death, stillness complements, in this culminating scene, the motion in a story that is permeated with the motifs of dance and journey. As Eakambaram rightly observes, movement bears in itself the paradoxical presence of "stillness" because, like Eternity and Time, dance incorporates "the Absolute and its Maya as a single trans-dual form." Moreover, in contrast with the crowd, Raju's devotions and daily entrance into the dwindling river act like a paused action, holding back the normal current of time. Narayan's sense of dramatic timing enhances the suspended action by establishing, at the crucial moment, a "profoundest silence" that arrests the total scene. The focus on the ailing figure on Velan's arm, muttering his prayers in the first shafts of dawn's light, is absolute and unremitting, that is, until Narayan's sense of incongruity filters back into the description.

It was difficult to hold Raju on his feet, as he had a tendency to flop down. They held him as if he were a baby. Raju opened his eyes, looked about, and said, "Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs—" He sagged down (220) (my emphasis).

Do the rains come? Does Raju believe that he has extracted a gift from the gods or has he merely performed a parting bow for the crowd's approval? These questions, deliberately left unanswered, fill the scene with ambiguity. Furthermore, Narayan's disjunctive language (as shown in emphasis) undercuts—or attempts to undercut—the concurrent movement of utter faith in Raju's small, yet potent, sacrifice. It is as if Narayan infuses Raju's ultimate act with an optimal measure of uncertainty

42 Eakambaram, 75.
(which is otherwise described as absence) because he appreciates, or intuits, the power with which notions of sanctity can be communicated through modes extrinsic to language.

Since meta-linguistic signs influence the text above, I turn first to a minor detail: the dashes and lack of a full stop following Raju's last words. The omitted punctuation could be a typing error except that the same omission occurs twice on the final page, the first time when Velan tries to tell the Swami that he should save himself. For this reason, I propose that the omitted punctuation is of direct relevance to Narayan's beliefs. Velan achieves no more than "The doctors say--" before Raju asks to be helped to his feet for the irrevocable and, seemingly, final physical journey to the river. Here, the punctuation appears to signal Raju's acceptance of the deep stage of his sacrifice, yet, linked to the latter example, the "unended" punctuation acts as a sort of code indicating the transition from this world to the next. The doctors' unsaid words about death unite with the holy man's unended revelation about the rains to suggest that Raju's consciousness has overcome the physical restrictions of this life. Such an interpretation alludes to Narayan's ideas on personality and soul, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, which are driven by the Indian concept of *karma*. In other words, Narayan's punctuation oddity suggests the extension of life through death.

Surprisingly, Narayan's comic mode can also be seen to support absence as a supra-human paradigm. Theoretically, Narayan's comedies rely on incongruities—or gaps in logical meaning—that are generated from the connection of two or more non-complementary ideas or subjects. This gap, like that which appears in the improbable connection between the imposter and the holy man, is filled with laughter, a non-linguistic expression. Although laughter is often the result of words, the act of laughter is a positive expression where words are absent. When Raju discloses his method of placating Rosie after a quarrel, he explains this idea in words that, I suggest, are very close to his creator's heart: "I thought the best solvent would be laughter rather than words. Words have a knack of breeding more words, whereas laughter, a deafening, roaring laughter, has a knack of
swallowing everything up" (180). Transpose this statement to Narayan's over-arching comic mode and the term "everything" encompasses many worlds and many unknowns, so that laughter, in its characteristic of swallowing multiplicity into a single roar, is very close, if not imimical, to the aesthetic sublimity of the rasa of humour and to the altered consciousness of yogic release. In all three cases there is a concentration of an undefined consciousness which is concurrently a pleasurable release: in all three cases rational explication through words is absent. It may be unconventional to conceive of laughter as an attribute of sanctity, but, Narayan's comic mode continually explores communication where language has proven to be inadequate. Meaningful non-linguistic expression, which bridges the gap that words cannot describe, is analogous to the process of conceptualising sanctity by apophatic means and is especially pertinent in Hindu contexts, where paradox functions as the primary means of training the imagination's travels beyond human time and place.

Another aspect of this line of argument is a similarity evident in a comparison of laughter's potential indication of supra-humanness with Narayan's impressions of the Grand Canyon. In My Dateless Diary, which was written concurrently with The Guide, Narayan describes the awe that he experienced when surrounded by the massive rocks. He realises that the word "fixity" is inappropriate to a landscape that has been "created by the interaction of water and soil and rock, and mellowed by light and sun"; to a landscape, moreover, which is quintessentially a place of the spirit. "Here all religions meet and merge. It is here you feel with an unbearable agony, a mystic mood; the almighty takes his name here ... it is easy to become incoherent in this presence." (my emphasis)43

Spiritual presence is once more marked by the limitations of language and replaced by an apprehension through intuitive and emotional faculties.

Incoherence, laughter, stillness and absence fuse and overlap in a paradoxical equation whose nether side equals supra-human presence. This non-rational fusion perhaps has something to do with the popularised form of the

concept of māyā, the snake-rope perceptual error. "The appearance of the snake in the rope is not real, but it is not wholly unreal either, or else it could not appear at all. Error is thus the apprehension of that which is neither being nor non-being, hence, it is inexpressible." (my emphasis) Can the errors so often expressed in Narayan's fiction, those same errors which provoke laughter, contain a measure of this approach to inexpressibility? Error, in Saksena's sense, relays an intimation of supra-human knowledge and is thus akin to Jesus's comments on the parables, through which the lay person can see but not "perceive" the substance of God, otherwise known as Truth. The two religious systems thus allow opaque signs to represent unknowability. However, where conceptual Hinduism authorises perception by means other than the rational or knowledgable word, the main thrust of establishment Christianity advocates reason, backed by trust. Furthermore, somehow or somewhere in the quirks of historical processes, Christianity deemed moral error to be sin and, by extension, removed serious consideration of perceptual inconsistencies to a negative position in relation to the elevated value of error enjoyed in Hindu contexts. In postmodern climates, western intellectuals have reverted to anatomising perceptual error (like that of the snake-rope indeterminacy) and have instigated debates on the unreliability of language, epistemology, ontology or any logos that claims certainty in knowledge. Such challenges to intellectual authority (paradoxically delivered in intellectual arguments) claim "absence" as an axiomatic term which designates the non-sense or negative indeterminacy of meaning in language. In other words, deconstructionists use "error" to confirm absence as a gap which cannot be breached. The theory contrasts with Hindu concepts that rely on deceptive appearances in order to conceive a consciousness which replaces the gap, even though this consciousness lies beyond the boundaries of empirical knowledge. Raju's life encapsulates the notion that error is the apprehension of that which is inexpressible, since there is no way to distinguish between the rope and snake of

his actions.

Narayan directly addresses the issue of inexpressibility in the epiphanic incident in which Raju considers directing his talent to the business of a "night guide for the skies". He reasons that a methodical, "patch by patch" count of the stars would qualify him for such a job: "He suddenly realised that if he looked deeper a new cluster of stars came into view; by the time he assimilated it into his reckoning, he realised he had lost sight of his starting point and found himself entangled in hopeless figures" (13-14). Despite Raju's flippant dismissal of the sky chart proposition, Narayan makes an astute statement on human nature's persistent attempts to calculate the immeasurable rather than to invest faith in emotional and psychic intuition. Over and above demonstrable physical dimensions and properties, stars, when seen by the human eye and imagination, exhibit mythical qualities which symbolise the plurality and unity of the cosmos. Stars appear to be symbolic markers in a Narayan universe because a similar incident occurs in The Vendor of Sweets wherein Jagan experiences a transformation of attitude towards his life and meaning while in the company of the stars. According to Raichura, Raju's epiphanic moment under the stars marks the beginning of his change in outlook. The one-time schemer gradually becomes aware--"patch by patch"--of the spiritual vastness that is available even to inferior human perspectives.45 Raichura's interpretation highlights the pivotal metaphor of the journey and aligns it, in this instance, with the transition from Raju's earthbound condition to his end in the immeasurable cosmic spheres. I remain unconvinced about Raju's consciousness which, unlike Jagan's, shows no sign of attitudinal change. Instead, the structure, at this early stage in the novel, invites readers to consider the situation of the incongruous "holy man" in terms of Raju's ineptitude and the various resonances of metaphorical guidance that surround his journey. The guide's final, swift and, above all, ironic conversion is left to the last moment.

My interpretation suggests that the sacred and the profane inexorably co-

45 Raichura, 121.
exist. Narayan makes this manifest through narratorial absence and ambiguity, language reduction, laughter and error. Together, the various narrative techniques and tropes of uncertain meanings constitute an input of signs which, in one way or another, represent inexplicability. These signs orchestrate the novel's final scene to promote an uncanny surety about Raju's action and the positive supra-human presence that he, Velan and the villagers experience on a deeply pleasurable, if solemn, emotional level. Human certainty exits the stage and releases the imagination to a freedom in which a greater consciousness is perceived. Once divested of self-interest and materialism, Raju can sense the rains long before the arrival of the promised flood. In Hindu terms, he sees the "reality" of the spirit without the camouflage of māyā. Perhaps the most crucial anomaly raised by the novel is the disjuncture between the supreme value placed on the act of abandoning the ego and material possessions in the Hindu moral system and the arbitrariness of its preparation. Narayan intimates that Raju arrives at his moment of sacrifice both by accident and through his erratic enactment of the four-stage journey towards moksha. The means seem not to detract from or devalue the force of his renunciation of this world on behalf of his once misguided followers.

Narayan's The Guide continues the practice of his forbears who told stories about the mysteries of life over vast time scales and through interactive levels of consciousness. This twentieth-century storyteller's format diverges from the original epics only in his compression of the immeasurable possibilities of gods and humankind into the life of three, qualified protagonists, Raju, Rosie and Velan. Narayan's technique loses none of the dimensions of the epics: instead, he involves the mythical enigmas in further depths of paradox. Imbued with its author's abiding trust in incongruous events and love's capacity to transcend death, The Guide opens out the puzzle of human holiness through the metaphors of guidance, journey and performance. Through metaphor and interwoven narrative voices, Narayan guides Raju's story to the place of absence, that contradictory level of experience wherein apprehension of supra-humanness occurs. The final paradox is that Narayan
achieves the seriousness of his ideas through laughter since his comic mode controls every other facet of his technique and may indeed be implicated in the imaginative means to perceive the supra-human presence itself. At the same time, the wry vision always allows Narayan the opportunity to mock humans and their efforts to count the stars—and from this, the human Narayan is not excluded.

He is a most moral man, this storyteller and practitioner of supra-humanness who intuits that sacrifice is as surprising and, at the same time, as inevitable as any human performance. Goodness, Narayan suggests, is intrinsic to the human being, though its shape and expression may never be fixed, since virtue moves in an ephemeral dance through the diverse and incongruous masks of its human actors. What appears to be absurd is but an element of the philosophical, spiritual, aesthetic and experiential riddle of Hindu life wherein multiplicity and never-endedness are commonplace and the inexplicable is ordinary and central to experience. It is, after all, just Raju’s story, the tale of a journey to the place of sacrifice and paradoxical absence where supra-human notions dance.
SACRED BREATH AND UNFINISHED NARRATIVES:
NURUDDIN FARAH'S CLOSE SESAME AND THE HOLY QUR'AN
Sacred Breath and Unfinished Narratives:
Nuruddin Farah's Close Sesame and the Holy Qur'an

[God's] bestowal of the benefit of clarity of discourse [the Qur'an] ... through which they express what is hidden within their hearts ... Thereby He smoothed the coarseness of their tongues, and eased what they found difficult. Then they declared His Oneness by means of it, and glorified and revered Him.

Ibn Al-Tabari

The surface deceptions and improvisational character of Narayan's Hinduism would seem incompatible with the strict and well-defined codes of Islam. However, Nuruddin Farah's Close Sesame raises, in its own unique way, similar questions about uncertainty and doubt as the narrative follows Deeriye, an aged and devout Muslim, incapacitated by a chronic asthmatic condition, through his final days in Mogadiscio, 1981. The major distinctions between the two characters are found in the contrast of Raju's last-minute conversion to holiness with Deeriye's life-long commitment to his faith as well as in the nature of their adversaries: Raju battles against social mores and a drought whereas Somali politics prove to be Deeriye's toughest enemy. Ultimately, they both learn to probe deeper into their spiritual centres and encounter, in death, another way of being.

Despite his near non-active participation in the novel's political scenario, the inspirational patriarch, Deeriye, challenges the stronghold of injustice constructed by Somalia's dictator, the General. Modelled on Siyad Barre, Somalia's autocratic head of state from 1969 to 1991, the General controls the nation through corrupt and manipulative methods. In a collage of rumour and intrigue, assumption and penetrating thought, the narrative circumscribes a sequence of assassination attempts on the General's life, in which Mursal, Deeriye's son, is directly involved. Descriptions of the events invariably contain elements of secrecy or incompleteness,
primarily due to the narrator's location in Deeriye's consciousness. While valuable in terms of Deeriye's thought, this positioning confines the narrative to a single point of view, which is further impaired by the old man's asthmatic blackouts. The limited vision is exacerbated by the political situation since the concealed conspiratorial plots and the General's propaganda machine both summarily curtail the circulation of information. However, the most important aspect of the text's diffuse nature is the secrecy integral to Allah, who underwrites the narrative with one fundamental assumption: human life and its narratives are only a part of the supra-human potential of the human condition. Thus, no matter how diverse and complex human knowledge is shown to be, the secular condition remains less than the sacred whole. Seen from this perspective, Close Sesame's open-endedness and characteristic puzzles are expressions of the numinous presence of Allah in people's experience.

When Deeriye is drawn into the action to uphold justice and avenge the death of his son, he, like the four conspirators before him, appears to fail. His bullet-ridden body lies as a symbol of defeat at the feet of the victorious forces of injustice. Such an interpretation, however, fails to acknowledge Farah's principal subjects, the impalpable powers that abide with Deeriye. Through Deeriye's meditations on his faith, family and past, Farah counters Close Sesame's political contexts with a tale of Deeriye's love for his wife, family and community which is but the tangible aspect of his love for Allah. Imagery, shaped after the novel's symbolic source, the Qur'an, enables Farah to counterpoint the all-knowingness of Allah with incomplete and imperfect human knowledge. The movement from a state of partial knowledge to one of wholeness in the sacred embrace evokes a fundamental Qur'anic truth wherein human nature is seen as an entity, made in the likeness of God and imbued with His spirit. For believers like Deeriye, the earthly journey is a stage in a process that will eventually lead to a unification with the sacred whole. On this basis, Close Sesame is but half a narrative in the process of realising its totality.
the puzzling word

Language, for Farah, is Allah's incomparable gift and humankind's most troublesome liability. Such fundamental ambivalence, in the substance of his art, makes Farah a storyteller whose narratives are also puzzles in which the tool, language, examines itself. Although basic to human experience, the tool is far from a simple construct since it is, at once, that which leads the mind to truth and that which impairs truth. Consequently, Farah's writing exhibits an anxiety over the power, for better or worse, which is intrinsic to language; his language, political language and God's language. This conceptual sensitivity to language is consistent with European theoretical movements through modernism to postmodernism but, more significantly, Farah's relationship to language is the product of his Somali, Qur'anic and personal inheritance.

Farah describes his childhood in the Ogaden, one of Somalia's disputed territories, as schizophrenic. His memory of that time is inundated with Arabic, Amharic, English or Italian books and education which co-existed with a world-view defined by Somali oral culture. Linguistic plurality thus generated a conflict between values of written and oral expression and created a tension in Farah's comprehension of his self and his place in the world. He became aware of the human condition's divided and contradictory nature: on the one hand, plurality led to fragmentation and alienation and, on the other, plurality unfolded the possibilities available within an "inordinately varied" cosmos.¹ Born into this eclectic cultural environment, Farah was, so to speak, an exile from a Somali identity and a cosmopolitan of the imagination at birth.

From another point of view, Farah sustains an umbilical link with the ancient Somali veneration of poetry through his mother, a poet. As a boy, the sight of her pacing up and down, "fully engaged in the act of poetic composition," prompted him to consider poetry as a vocation with which he could propagate "the supremacy of the Somali mind and culture over any other."² Such single-

² Ibid.
mindedness of purpose proved untenable in a climate where conflicting colonial influences suggested anything but the superiority of Somali culture. The importance of God's words in the boy's Qur'anic lessons in Arabic overshadowed the significance of the Somali language until he discovered his name and a sense of historical validity in *One Thousand and One Nights*. "I wonder if my writing dates back to that moment when I appropriated the spirit of the prince [Nuruddin] and stepped from a culture belonging to the oral tradition to the written one,"\(^3\) writes Farah. World authors like Dostoevski, Hugo, Tayeb Salih, Joyce and Beckett, and undergraduate years spent in Chandigarh at an Indian university further extended Farah's imaginative parameters. This eclectic cultural experience consolidated his feeling for a "plurality of truths"\(^4\) and contributed to his stance on doubt, which he explains in a recent interview: "I usually doubt almost everything, and therefore, because I doubt, I would look at different possibilities of looking at the same thing."\(^5\)

Doubt and plurality thus constitute positive material for intellectual endeavour, though not without some inherent dangers: extremes of doubt can lead to nihilism and excessive plurality tends to induce a diminished sense of value. So, although Farah claims to advocate such views, his fiction reveals an uneasy balance between the positive and negative tendencies of doubt and plurality. A further tension arises in Farah's writing style which can be seen as a development of the traditional Somali fusion of politics and religious poetry. While tradition conceives this form as an ideal marriage of argument and lyricism, there are components within the two approaches that remain incompatible. Fundamentally, cerebral and emotional knowledge have dissimilar terms of reference and this disparity creates a dialectic in Farah's work which is not unlike the training of a scientific eye on poetical and numinous dimensions. This ill-matched sub-textual debate sometimes exposes the arbitrary nature of language and, at other times, the contradictory

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid 1597.
symbolism that emerges from the debate catches glimpses of the truths to be found in the human quest for meaning.

To compound the complexities of Farah's cultural identity, Siyad Barre, "the self-declared Messiah of the Somali nation," enforced stringent censorship limits on all areas of the nation's life which eventually led to Farah's exile. Three-quarters of a serialised novel in the new Somali orthography appeared in the local newspapers during 1976. The pieces were censored at that time but it was the publication in English of A Naked Needle in 1976 that caused the final rift. When Farah planned to return to Mogadiscio after a voluntary two-year residency abroad, friends warned him of the dangers which the reception of the book had generated in the Barre-controlled state. Since that time, Farah has lived apart from his country and written exclusively about the Somali mind and experience in the medium of the English language. He considers that external spatial and linguistic distance sharpens his inside knowledge of Somalia and equips him with the freedom to pursue "the role of the writer in politics as ... the depository of the nation's memory, the trustee to the nation's wishes and the custodian of the people's views." As Derek Wright points out, when Farah speaks of exile he could possibly be "camouflaging his private pain with a bravura rhetoric," since his most recent interview stresses the need to "create an alternative reality" by "sailing back on the imagination." Truth probably resides across both points of view and in the nebulous area between. Nonetheless, to counter the seriousness of this form of self-confession, Farah can quip about his choice of subject matter: "The Qur'an could not be mine because it


9 Pajalich, 71.
was God's."¹⁰ He may, however, be misguided on this matter for, as I intend to argue, Close Sesame bears a relationship to the sacred text that is easy to underestimate.

In overview, despite undercurrents of nihilism, Farah's storytelling is prompted by his desire to inform, reform and affirm. With this in mind, the following quotation from Close Sesame might be seen to act as a key to the novel's specific language orientation:

Deeriye was sitting in his favourite armchair, listening with elaborate relish to his favourite litanies of the Koran being recited by his favourite sheikh: each Koranic word created crests of waves of its own, curiously rich with the wealth of the interpretation the hearer heaped on them: Deeriye's heart danced with delight.¹¹

Following Qur'anic practice, the passage emphasises words in the medium of engaged and aurally effective speech. Farah's consciousness of orality, even though he works in a printed medium, is acute and no more contradictory than his chosen symbolic source, the Qur'an, the "uncreated" book conveyed to the illiterate Muhammad in a vision heard in the heart. Secondly, aestheticism and sacrality are one and the same practice and concept, and this living activity is joyful. Finally, each word contains multiple meanings whose subsequent interpretation is the responsibility of a partnership between the word and its interpreter. This veneration of the living vigour of words is a distinctive feature of Islam, wherein devotion through the language of the Qur'an enables the faithful to apprehend God. In recitation and chant, believers temporarily recover sacred time. Coined by Mircea Eliade, sacred time or illud tempus describes that characteristic of myth and ritual

¹⁰ Farah, "Why I Write," 1592.

which enables the "various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred ... into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really establishes the World."$^{12}$ Qur'anic revelation to Muhammad epitomises such a breakthrough: the precise place and date of the occurrence shape Islamic rituals and offer believers like Deeriye authoritative guidance on the induction of sacred time into their daily lives. The above lyrical passage evokes one instance of sacred intervention and, in the choice of metaphors, demonstrates Farah's acute awareness of the Qur'anic symbols which "both reveal and conceal, pointing towards, if not fully disclosing, a different order of reality and experience."$^{13}$ Deeriye's uplifted consciousness, "rich with the wealth of interpretation," indicates his love of Allah and points to the breadth and depth of an apprehension of "reality" within supra-human parameters.

of stones and the breath in Islam

The Holy Qur'an is a logical symbolic source for a story about a devout Muslim in a social setting where sacred words permeate the language of everyday life. In line with the tensions inherent in Farah's relationship to language, two wide-ranging motif patterns emerge from the narrative: on the one hand, an explicit stone symbolism demonstrates linguistic arbitrariness and, on the other hand, the breath complex confirms the narrative's profound affirmation of Islam. Together, the motif designs signify the negative and positive implications of Farah's underlying proposition of textual incompleteness.

When Mursal's co-conspirator, Mukhtaar, shows signs of insanity, Deeriye reflects on minds that disintegrate, which in this analysis is analogous to semantics that disintegrate:

> A mind so overcrowded with ideas and things, a mind made into the symbol of disorder and indecision by the


powers that be, a mind rendered useless because it cannot decipher these symbols, cannot tell apart the good shadows from the bad, cannot distinguish between the virtuous and the wicked (120).

Language, likewise, is apt to become overloaded and subsequently dysfunctional, a phenomenon which emerges as the topic of discussion when Yassin, the grandson of the un-neighbourly neighbours, hits Deeriye with a stone. In Islam, the Black Stone of Ka'aba and "symbol of th[e] covenant made between man and God"\(^\text{14}\) is worshipped as the spatial centre of Islamic faith, "the axis mundi and therefore the foundation for the rest of creation."\(^\text{15}\) This pivotal stone symbol is similarly present in the metaphorical title of the Islamic creed, known as the "Five Pillars of the Islamic Faith". Stones, therefore, are vital to the practical and metaphorical expression of Islamic sanctity. On the other hand, stones are identified with Satan—or jinn and other creatures who err from correct conduct. Known as "The Stoned" (raj'\(\text{i}m\)), Satan, it is said, was stoned out of heaven by the angels with "piercing shooting stars."\(^\text{16}\) In ritualised form, Mina's three pillars are stoned in the pilgrimage's re-enactment of the three occasions when Satan was stoned by Ishmael.\(^\text{17}\) Alternatively, "the stoned" are wrongdoers who are reviled by verbal stoning. The contradistinction of verbal and physical stoning by believers who are seen to be devout and non-violent of character is central to the debate on justice in Close Sesame. Deeriye describes it himself:

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There is a whole lot of material on the symbolic and religious significance of stones. Idols of stones, which were worshipped had to be discarded and they gave way to an All-present, Omni-this or-that, complemented with a sacred word and code of behaviour which still had room for stones: the Wailing Wall, the Kaaba and the making use of stones to chase Satan and his hangers-on. Madmen, with whom a saintliness of a kind is associated, are stoned by children—but not by adults, for in children, in a manner of speaking, dwells the divided and unseasoned man or woman. Nobody ever stones the object of one's love (62).

Even the latter is contradicted because, as Deeriye informs Zeinab. Somalis stone crows which they once worshipped. How can stones and stoning be defined against such a mass of contradictions?

On a metaphorical level, the satanic General insults the nation with his autocratic word games. Yassin successfully stones the innocent Deeriye and reverses Mahad's symbolic failure to hit his target, the General. Deeriye's obsession with Yassin's stoning of the pious in contemporary Mogadiscio echoes, albeit perversely, the reverent attention which the pious accord to the Ka'aba. The Somali saying which claims "that a stone thrown at a culprit hits but the innocent" (67) seems to be the only statement which rings true. Even the Prophet was stoned when his revelation of God's words were taken for the ravings of a reactionary madman. Ibn Khalifatul II's report of one instance foreshadows Deeriye's fate with uncanny precision: "The Prophet then stood alone like a wall, and soon a stone struck his forehead and made a deep gash in it."18 In Farah's version, Deeriye stands in front of the window: "It was then that something struck him, something

which the instant it hit him made his face awash with blood and the blindfold pain
made him moan for help" (67). Though Farah undoubtedly intends the stoning of
Muhammad to be part of the contradictory symbolism, it is doubtful that he
modelled Deeriye's character directly on the holiest figure in Islamic history.
However, coincidence or not, Khalifatul Il's description has seeded a possible
interpretation that I will return to later.

Stone is also the structural material of the sacred cave in which Muhammad
received the visions which conveyed Allah's words. Caves are implicated in the
novel's title, since "open sesame" is the magical appeal to stone in One Thousand
and One Nights: there, words are spoken and freedom is gained. The inversion of
this command, "close sesame," suggests a negative closure, yet indications of
despair and exhausted resistance to dictatorship must be considered alongside the
notion that the promised revelation abides within the stone. The title thus embraces
the silent stone and the sacred chant in its single and divisible symbol. Finally, the
contradictory stone symbolism, in its movement between qur'anic lore and
Mogadiscio's politics, also resonates in the lyricism of Farah's art. When Farah
depicts Deeriye as "a cairn of clothing wrapped in reverence" (147) and Natasha as
"simply a float-stone in this his sea of contradictions" (51), he employs the mystical
language of paradox, used traditionally to suggest the inexplicability of God. In this
respect, the poet and the mystic are one because "paradox is a way of
understanding the otherwise nonunderstandable."¹⁹ As a motif pattern, the stone
symbolism highlights the contradictory nature and semantic overload of language
and provides a surface model for the novel's internal motif schema, breath. The
stone motif pattern draws attention to the impaired nature of communication while
the breath schema conveys many significant messages.

This breath schema grows out of the novel and can be conceived,
analytically, as that which shapes the narrative into a three-dimensional semantic
field. Motifs interrelate and reverberate in an ongoing process and, gradually, a

¹⁹ Michiko Yusa, "Paradox and Riddles." The Encyclopedia of Religion,
literary cosmos is revealed, wherein the surface metaphor is message, its atomistic unit is breath and its ceiling is revelation. Messages, whether of qur'anic origins or generated from politics, past or present, permeate the novel and resonate far back into antiquity and outwards to infinity. Physiologically and symbolically, these messages are borne on the phenomenon of breath. When the Qur'an speaks of creation, archaic signs are invested with Allah's indelible authority: "Then He fashioned him and breathed into him of His spirit." (my emphasis)\(^2^0\) Frithjof Schuon further explicates the qur'anic symbolism which, according to mystical traditions, renders haqiqah (truth) discernible:

in the sensory order the Divine Presence has two symbols or vehicles--or two "natural manifestations"--of primary importance: the heart within us, which is our centre, and the air around us, which we breathe ... When we breathe, the air penetrates us and, symbolically, it is as though it introduced into us the creative ether and the light too; we inhale the Universal Presence of God.\(^2^1\)

The properties of air, wind and breath provide a paradigmatic metaphor for divine essence *par excellence*, since the prevailing features of these phenomena are invisibility and omnipresence.\(^2^2\) William Chittick's paper on Ibn al-Arabi explains that the "Breath of the All-Merciful" is "the exhalation of God within which all created beings *take* shape, just as words *take* shape within human breath."\(^2^3\)

20 Khalifatul II (trans), *The Holy Qur'an*, Sura 32.10.


thus leads to the word, the central icon of Islam for, in spite of the paradox, the word is the faith's most visible sign, seen in the intricate arts of calligraphy and architecture and heard in the practice of prayer and Qur'anic chanting. The messages and revelation of the Qur'an and humankind's conception through the breath of God's spirit constitute the inspirational foundations of Farah's motif scheme. Farah manoeuvres these symbols in much the same way that architects construct mosques around the shapes, patterns and inscriptions of the sacred Arabic language. He creates a motif design which involves breath, lungs, mouths, voices, asthma, words, messages, recitation, prayer, chant, oral poetry, tape recordings, telephones and stories. Speakers and orators, news readers and storytellers, devotees and listeners and, most significantly, messengers are all caught up in an architectonic configuration whose highest point is marked by the visions that carry revelation. In overview, the doubt that overrides much of *Close Sesame*’s surface narrative is, ironically, underwritten by Farah's sure-footed motif design, which has variously been described as Joycean, "fluid, adventurous, protean and abundant;”24 as networks, "les reseaux d'images et d'allusions;”25 or "clusters of linguistic resources centred on certain recognisable motifs."26 Further, Farah’s leitmotif artistry is seen as analogous to music in which "a complex indirect form of narration based on echoes, symmetry and musical patterns makes his an original voice, for which the opposition between committed writer and the aesthete has become obsolete."27 If I perceive Farah’s linguistic design as a metaphoric cosmology of breath and a mosque of words, this bears tribute to his art which is finally more generous with


doubt's generation of possibility than with its threat of dissolution. Close Sesame can be entered by any portal and at any level of intellectual pursuit that appeals. The only vision which the book rejects is the blind alley of autocracy.

ambiguity, journeys and half-truths

The clarity emerging from the breath motif and the ambiguity undermining the stone motif together parallel the Qur'an's position on language which, for Farah's purposes, is one of the most significant concepts raised in the sacred text. Here is Ibn Khalifatul Ii's interpretation of the Qur'an's discourse on clarity and ambiguity:

He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book; in it there are verses that are decisive in meaning--they are the basis of the Book--and there are others that are susceptible of different interpretations. But those in whose hearts is perversity pursue such thereof as are susceptible of different interpretations, seeking discord and seeking wrong interpretation of it. And none knows its right interpretation except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge; they say, "We believe in it; the whole is from our Lord."28

God's text thus resists resolution since, as Deeriye reminds his daughter Zeinab, it is "the prerogative of God alone to be sure of anything" (231). Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi allude to the revelation-concealment puzzle when they call the Qur'an and the Holy Book's attendant exegeses the labyrinth gateway, warning against losing oneself in the funerar mazeways of resemblances, appearances,

28 Khalifatul Ii (trans), The Holy Qur'an, sura 3.8.
metaphors, allegories, resonances, interpretations, re-presentations, and symbolizations, yet all the while using these very a-maze-ments and a-muse-ments to praise plain sense.29

In Khalifatul Il's introduction to his translation of the Qur'an, he stresses the "philosophical design" implicit in the Arabic language: "Its words have been designed with a purpose. Its roots have been devised for the expression of elementary emotions and experiences, and these by slight variations in actual use give to Arabic words a significance both wide and deep." Khalifatul Il's ideological bias might not survive scientific scrutiny but his description suggests that variations and ambiguities are purposeful, rather than inexact, in the Muslim mind. In other words, the sacred language's indeterminacy, paradoxically, makes its truth inviolable. A statement that totally reveals itself has nowhere else to go; thus the sacred must, by its eternal nature, never be ended, closed or fully revealed. Truth, in this sense, is something yet to be. This fundamental characteristic motivates Farah's symbolic experimentation and, subsequently, imbues Close Sesame's textual diffuseness with unexpected clarity. From another angle, the sacred authority's unwillingness—or inability—to yield all of its mysteries in clear and unambiguous language is apt to provoke similar obscurities in secular communications, for both positive and negative ends. Broadly speaking, the beneficial qualities of mystery reside in Deeriye, whereas, on the negative side, the General enhances his illegitimate authority by deliberately withholding information. The ambiguity found in the Qur'an also relates to the conceptual journey from the status of the profane to that of the sacred. Metaphorically, Deeriye makes this journey through the narrative Close Sesame. The idea is first presented while Deeriye ruminates over history as his daughter-in-law, Natasha, drives him through


30 Khalifatul Il, vol 1, i.
Mogadiscio to Baar Novecento.

Deeriye contemplates the issue of time and the contradictions characteristic of human understanding. His mind moves through an accumulation of poetic sketches that represent ideas across a large conceptual space. Initially, he thinks of time in terms of sound: "Time was an echo of a purring, revving engine, a change of gear, the ticking of two wrist watches ..." (94). While time is considered in terms of the simple objects and sounds of his travel, the prose, concurrently, draws on such complex issues as platonic notions, where historical semblances echo original acts. Deeriye's mind is spurred to contemplate time as a journey and, subsequently, his thought moves over one of the novel's pivotal lines: "time was travel, the journey each undertook so that another arrived, because each would eventually reach his or her destination having become another" (94). The ambiguous expression conveys existential concepts: the movement from this life to the next; human perception transformed into cosmic understanding; and the passage of one generation to the next. In its simple mysterious form, this journey is Deeriye's story. Farah's italicisation of another adds weight to the importance of the next life and the next generation; the former is the supra-human path, while the latter guides the transition of human values across earth-bound time.

However, the vital issues of supra-human and human continuity are given scant attention, for Farah's prose moves on through the city and picks up threads of subjects already raised in the novel--catnaps, cattle, history, asthma and absence--binding them into a complex visual metaphor:

Time was the photograph whose future print would read like an illuminated manuscript: rather like a negative with which depressions and dark spots, something reminiscent of an X-rayed lung while coughing, while wheezing; one person's conditioned asthma. Time was history; and history consisted of these illuminated prints--not truths ... and history was a congeries of half-truths (95).
Half-truths are integral to Farah's narrative wherein the half is not a denial of the concept of a full truth, but an affirmation, shadowy and evanescent, of the whole; the negative to the print of some unseen and, from a human perspective, unknowable future. Throughout the monologue, Farah conveys the idea that Deeriye is endeavouring to place his trust in such a future but his thoughts become grounded instead in colonial statistics and Mogadiscio's chaotic traffic. The former represents the racism of Somalia's past, while the latter evokes the impotent muddle of the present and neither signal an improved future. However, instead of the dead-end at which Farah drives his narrative, a non-verbal communication between the old man and his foreign daughter-in-law gives the monologue and its two crucial ideas a positive gloss: knowledge is a matter of half-truths and half-truths are determined, as described above, by the sacred design of the human journey which promises a destination where one becomes "another," a destination where one becomes spiritually whole. In contrast with the secular mechanics of political concealment and conspiratorial secrecy, sacred ambiguity, half-truths and future becomings thus suggest a spiritual amplitude in the next world. I will argue that divided foci and the half-way states of sainthood, madness and asthma are further means through which Farah reinforces the narrative's partial evocation of the promised sacred whole. However, some remarks on Farah's position with respect to the feminine principle in supra-human contexts need to be addressed before relationships between partial and whole states are further explored. A feminised supra-human subject is similarly influenced by tensions arising between that which is incontestable and can be clearly stated and that which cannot ultimately be unambiguously resolved.

the feminine principle

The Qur'an's explicit view of history through God's chosen prophets from Abraham (Ibrahim) to Muhammad illustrates, according to Ibn Nasr, humankind's need for revelation:

although a theomorphic being [Man] is by nature
negligent and forgetful; he is by nature imperfect ... It is a
going to sleep and creating a dream world around us
which makes us forget who we really are and what we
should be doing in this world. Revelation is there to
awaken man from this dream and remind him of what it
really means to be man.31

Thus the Qur'an justifies its existence on the basis of secular imperfection. Close
Sesame's constant reference to repetitious patterns and equivocal cycles of events
parallels the Qur'an's historical line of prophets. However, whereas Qur'anic back-
referencing functions as self-justification, Close Sesame's historical allusions are
deceptive and invariably leave Deeriye hesitating between scepticism and belief.
Ironically, Deeriye's personal need for clarification is theoretically forbidden because
of the Qur'an's insistence that revelation stops with Muhammad, the ultimate
prophet. Thus, while Deeriye believes the holy message to be sacrosanct, he is at
odds with the adamant finality of God's Word because he finds himself in a world
in dire need of further revelation.

Although personal, the visions of Deeriye's wife Nadiifa alleviate his need for
guidance and reassurance in much the same way that the angel Gabriel's revelation
brought sacred assurance to the first Muslims. Orthodox Islam takes a hard line on
the question of saints or walis (friends of God), but history is witness to what is
known as the "Cult of Saints" or the various charismatic figures who act as
intermediaries to God in the human imagination:

Despite the directness of the basic relationship between
human and divine in Islam, the general understanding has
long prevailed that this relationship can be facilitated and
secured through the mediation of one who clearly has
found favour and achieved status in the eyes of God ...

31 Nasr, Ideals and Realities of Islam, 22-23.
The medium of dreams, through which their desires are made known to the living, is a commonly accepted vehicle for communication.32

Saints do not dispute the absolute authority of the Prophet, but they do relieve the austerity of Allah’s last command. Nadiifa belongs to this order of experience and, although she has female precursors, Farah expressly designs her feminine spirituality to correct the general imbalance of gender within his native Somali society. In the Pajalich interview, Farah emphasises the roles of women in his fiction:

It is as if women in my novels determine the pace at which life is lived; whether they are absent or present they seem to determine how men should operate or should look at them or how they should view them ... And since the reality with which one has to live appears to be rather disappointing, I create conditions in the imagination in which women reign absolute. (my emphasis)33

Where better to reign than in the realm of the spirit?

Nadiifa, the dream vision, straddles sacred time and communicates extralinguistically through the mystical paradox of “speaking in the heart”. Like Narayan’s Velan, Deeriye needs a saintly and holy personage through whom to embrace the abstractions of the sacred except that, in Deeriye’s case, psychic spiritual encounters replace the physical presence of his wife denied him by imprisonment and, later, by her death. The visions are as real as flesh and blood actuality to the old man who realises that


33 Pajalich, 70.
nothing other than sinfulness or sleeplessness could separate him from his dreams and visions. They came clothed in human form, his wife appeared to him smelling of sweet perfume, her body fresh from smoke-bath and her breath from the fresh milk she had drunk (182).

At once sensuous and celestial, Nadiifa’s presence—and physical absence—unites heaven and earth in a powerful expression of the sacredness of human identity as it is understood in Islam. Nadiifa’s spirit self, clothed in earthly sensuality, is an inverted mirror-image of Deeriye’s diseased body, clothed in saintliness. She intervenes in earthly matters just as, conversely according to Elmi-Tiir, Deeriye’s sometime absence from human affairs signals his presence in divine realms. Separately and together, Nadiifa the dream and Deeriye the asthmatic mirror the divided, yet all-inclusive, nature of Farah’s narrative.

One critical incident in Deeriye’s early life, which amongst other things foreshadows Nadiifa’s spirit appearances, was his encounter with the Italians. Ethics required that the young Deeriye, as leader of the clan and guardian of inviolate clan allegiances, keep his promise of asylum to the unlucky man sought by the Italians, even if this meant endangering his own life. Deeriye’s fidelity to principles infuriated the Italians who threw the young leader into prison and massacred the clan’s cattle. Farah counteracts the disastrous aspects of the crisis with Deeriye’s first direct experience of God which is equally the first occasion when Farah slips the woman into a position of great influence. In the passage, Nadiifa is still very much alive but the writing already imbues her with spiritual connotations:

He had been kneeling down, saying one prayer after another, when he heard a voice call to him, a male voice from somewhere outside of himself and which told him to persevere, hold on to his principle. But when he opened his eyes, he found his wife by him ... And he was not alone. God had returned, Nadiifa had come to him (38).
Farah differentiates God from Nadiifa by name and sex, but not by action. God's presence is Nadiifa when filtered through Deeriye's consciousness, although Deeriye does not grasp the implications of his own phrasing. Deeriye thinks in terms of God, then Nadiifa, sensing that they are of the same community, but Farah writes "God had returned, Nadiifa had come" which implies that there are two names for the one phenomenon. Ambiguity is maintained because Nadiifa can be seen as either God's intermediary, another form of God, a figment of Deeriye's imagination, or the contraction of all three forms in one.34

Fabricating puzzles provides Farah with other means by which to evoke the confinement of human understanding within a halved, though nonetheless complex vision. The best definition of Farah's half-this and half-not-this vision appears in Deeriye's last attempt to explain Nadiifa's visitations to his pragmatic daughter:

She was too great to be invented. Too angelic. Like the divine revelation my mortal eyes happened to fall on the dawn Natasha called me away, to tell me that Mursal had disappeared. I could not have invented that. One does not invent God. He is there. He blesses those He loves, the deserving few, and no amount of inventiveness can invent Him (230-1).

Once again, Deeriye slips from the female earth-formed Nadiifa to the masculine designated and abstract God, without disturbing the mysterious semantic unity of the two unlike subjects, nor does he overstep the bounds of religious ethics. Puzzles, intimates Farah, need to be reborn like the sacred mysteries, again and again in the mind, to keep humanity's mental well-being intact. In other words, plain-spoken language cannot be divorced from language grounded in ambiguity.

34 By contrast Nawal El Saadawi's The Innocence of the Devil offers a poetic portrayal of Egyptian society in which Islam fails as an all-encompassing religion because, in her terms, the Qur'an denies the female identity equity with her male counterpart.
other messengers sacred and profane

Nadiifa, bearing messages from the supra-human realm, has many human counterparts in this novel of messages, relayed and withheld, secular and supra-human. Some messages are invested with far-reaching political consequences. A child messenger's interception, for instance, sparks off colonial reprisals which result in the cattle massacre and Deeriye's imprisonment, while cryptic telephone messages provide clues to the seriousness of the young men's subversive plots. Concurrently, sacred connotations arise in the names of the four conspirators because all four are named after those involved in bearing the Qur'an to humankind. Superimposing politics on sacred symbols appears sacrilegious but, leaving aside the numinous aspects of God's message, politics played a major role in the birth of Islam. Muhammad was obliged to protect the sacred message from the pagan Quraysh of Mecca who rejected Muhammad's plea for widespread religious unity. Thus, the Prophet was a political as well as a religious leader who overthrew tribal groups that contested power on material and cultural terms. Consequently, the activities of the four men in Mogadiscio in 1981 are, in many ways, a repetition of events that took place in Medina and Mecca between 610-630 A.D. Here, Deeriye mulls over the interconnections between the sacred and the secular.

"Mursal, Mahad, Mukhtaar and now Jibriil. What a fine set of names. And what suggestions! What a wealth of possibilities! Listen to this: the Messengers, the divine message; and the chosen one."

Deeriye's mind dwelled on the paradox and paradigmatical complications of the names. What could that mean? Mukhtaar, the chosen one, leaving a message for the messenger Mursal, and Jibriil wishing to bring forth

the dawning of a new era by delivering the divine message
to the messenger. Down with that infidel of a General,
amen! (76).36

However, names handed down from religious forbears do not carry the same
valency in 1981 where motivations are driven by secular rather than sacred justice,
although Mursal’s debates show that the early jihads or holy wars were often beset
with inter-factional rivalries and betrayals. Mucaaiwaya and Yaziid, who appear in
Mursal’s justification of *lex talionis*, were both involved in struggles over the
legitimacy of the Caliphate line of descent in which they acquired political
leadership by dubious, if not illegitimate means. These figures provide equivocal
historical evidence for Mursal’s and Mahad’s case of justifiable insurrection. This
said, the sacred connections in the messengers names are, at once, deeply troubling
for Deeriye and the reader because the contemporary messengers, unlike the
Muslim fathers, are all forcibly silenced.

Wiil-Waal and Sayyid Muhammad Abdulle Hassan are two significant
messengers who emerge from Somali history. Wiil-Waal’s significance lies in his
popular oral folktales which are inserted in the text as vehicles of traditional
wisdom. In the context of the family’s sense of identity, the stories are as valid as the
Qur’an for the tales link the children with their ancestral heritage and the storytelling
continuum through which all earth-bound life is joined and sustained. Once again,
Farah manipulates the stories in favour of female discernment, so that, in one, Wiil-
Waal’s wife confounds the king’s egotism and, in the second, the poor man’s
daughter solves the riddle with which Wiil-Waal tests his subjects. The placement
of the latter tale coincides with Deeriye’s realisation that his grandson Samawade
can communicate through dreams: “the dreams had now come back to him through

36 Mursal is a name given to prophets; Mukhtaar is a messenger of trust;
Mahad appears to be associated with the *Mahdi*, the “ever-living spiritual” guide
(Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 166); and Jibriil is the Angel Gabriel who
delivered the Qur’an to Muhammad.
his grandson who spoke his words, who saw them and who became his voice' (135). Since dreams bridge the divide between sacred and secular worlds, Deeriye's recognition of Samawade's dream-receptivity indicates that the old man, like Nadiifa in the narrative present, will be able to communicate with Samawade after death. Dreams transcend earth-bound time and complement the stories that travel through one generation to the next. The final tale of the blind man, who marvels over the ant's night creation, reinforces the mystical bond between Samawade and Deeriye and gives the children "the second greatest miracle" after God (199); the human ability to perceive and conceptualise the numinous through symbolism.

Muhammad Abdulle Hassan, the Sayyid, features in the novel's political polemic, although little in Close Sesame is far removed from a religious significance. Introduced when Deeriye reminisces over his own involvement in Somali history, the Sayyid's legendary offensives against his British adversaries are set against Deeriye's refusal to betray an inter-clan promise of asylum. Renowned for his outstanding religio-political poetry and his leadership of the Dervishes, the Sayyid counts as Somali's greatest hero. Deeriye reveres him and glosses over--or is unaware of--condemnations of the "mad cleric's" attacks on other religious men and of the "brutal and humiliating methods of forcing his will on others." Thus, when Deeriye aligns himself with the Sayyid, comparing the events of 1912 with the Italian confrontation of 1934 and the subversive plots against the General in 1981, he is caught unwittingly in a trap of untruth.

Deeriye confounds the composition date of his poetic treasure, the Sayyid's "Death of Corfield" and matches it, instead, with his year of birth in 1912. More importantly, as Wright points out, the two personalities are at variance: "The modes of resistance employed by Deeriye and the Sayyid, and their respective effects, have very little in common." Despite the Dervishes' eventual failure, the myth built...


38 Wright, The Novels of Nuruddin Farah, 119.
around the Sayyid's militancy on behalf of his God and country forged a place for him in the Somali consciousness as the father of the nation. In contrast, Deeriye's belief in non-violence causes his withdrawal from action, though ironically, this too leads to his identification as a national hero. Only in the assassination attempt does Deeriye approach the Sayyid's aggressive style although, paradoxically, its inept delivery saves Deeriye from committing an unforgivable crime against his faith. The effects of Deeriye's act are not described, yet Farah implies that the mystique drawn over the violent actuality of the Sayyid's life will likewise be accorded to Deeriye's abortive heroism. As I will discuss later in detail, Deeriye's end becomes his martyrdom, a transformation which promises to keep alive resistance against all repressive forces whether they be the Quraysh, the British, the Italians, the General or the corrupt forces yet to be born.

While Deeriye persists in correlating various patterns between Islamic and Somali histories, the novel constantly emphasises the irregularities that occur within those connections. During an interrogatory clan meeting, Deeriye begins to realise that his attempts to systematise history are subject to human perceptual error:

The main point of the inquisition rested on the question: could the solid structures of the city of Berbara withstand and survive the propensities of the Sayyid's vision and learned thought? The subject of today's colloquy, if one could call it that, was: could the weak structures of the nation-state bear the weight of constitutional responsibility clearly outlined therein? (173).

Likewise, he views his heroic reputation as a distortion of the bare actions of his life: "I was taken away, saved--this is the irony of history--by the Italians who threw me into prison and by that action turned me into a hero, something I don't believe I am or will ever be" (230). Since Farah clearly describes Deeriye's moral courage during the crisis of the disastrous cattle massacre, Deeriye himself is proved inaccurate in his evaluation of the situation. He underestimates his own importance,
overestimates the Sayyid's saintliness and, in some instances, fails to grasp the full import of his wife's numinous status. Even men of God err, simply because they are men.

Farah uses history as a reference point for the puzzle of time, a phenomenon whose sacred aspects are both within and beyond our concept of history. Sacred names, attributes and events resurface in history as symbols which people need in order to endow their lives with meaning. Farah's observation on his writing can be seen to apply to communication in general: "the images, the symbols and the metaphors are [the writer's] guide: they communicate the incommunicable."39 In Close Sesame, Farah implies that, in spite of irregularities and patterns that never quite match, the process of conceptualisation is valid because the material generated serves as the means through which to apprehend the sacred. So while Deeriye's consciousness registers the complexities of defining and intellectually grasping the phenomenon of time as history, Farah's voice delves deeper into the paradox of time as it is manifested in language, story-telling and divine apprehension. He declares his intention in the first enigmatic epigram:

Memory does not return
Like experience, more like imagination
How it would have been if, how it must
-- Patricia Beer

The mind's inability to reproduce the flux of time accurately is another unavoidable puzzle of human perception.

**divides, plurality and halves**

In terms of the plot, Farah develops Deeriye's intimate relationship with his God as one focus of the old man's divided attention. Though a good measure of his life is devoted to Allah, he is also a benign and monogamous patriarch who,

after his dear wife's death and towards the end of his own days, is still genuinely
ingterested in and concerned with family and social matters. Furthermore, he heads
a family that fosters the values of mutual affection and interpersonal respect. His
principled life, the son's legal profession and political activism, and the grandson's
attempts to redress the unjust stoning of his grandfather are all aspects of an
enduring sense of justice and openness characteristic of this family. Moreover, the
different points of view, which each member of the family represents, merge into
a cohesive unit that advocates equality between generations, sexes and different
ethnic roots: there is the religious Deeriye, the legal Mursal, the scientific Zeinab, the
celestial Nadiifa, the foreign Natasha, and Samawade, the young and innocent
translator. At a metaphorical level, Deeriye's storytelling to his grandchildren places
the family cluster within the traditional continuum that carries oral wisdom through
generations, while Nadiifa's visionary spiritual leadership provides a channel for
supra-human wisdom to illuminate the family's secular condition.

All these indications of unity occur under the contrastive spectre of the
General's impediments to communication. Instead of promoting unity, the General
contorts and distorts the communicating word in order to disempower citizens.
Throughout Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship—the trilogy of
which Close Sesame is the final volume—Farah examines the many ways in which
people attempt to overcome their lack of political, social and gender equality. In
Close Sesame, the four conspirators employ unsuccessful secretive strategies to
combat the General's surveillance network of spies and informers. In another sense,
the expansive and egalitarian nature of Deeriye's family is directly opposed to
traditional clan and male hierarchies which form the infrastructure of the General's
authority. Thus Farah criticises not only the regime's activities but its structure
which, being a rigid hierarchical system, is no different from the repressive
organisations established by colonial rulers. Finally, although Mursal and Deeriye
become victims of the General's megalomania, Farah indicates that the integrated
family structure, held together by the women and children, will prevail.

Split perspectives or, in some instances, half-visions, permeate Close
Sesame, for they originate in the blend of divine and secular natures and in the
"plurality of truths" that inform Farah's art. The same divided and only half-revealed viewpoint emerges in the novel's polemic on madness. Madness is seen as a continuum between two extremes: at one end, the mad abide in an altered state of consciousness wherein they are said to be touched by God whereas, at the other extreme, madness is psychological breakdown induced by inhumane, anti-social behaviour on behalf of the so-called authorities. Deeriye's private story encounters the two extremes, for he is both touched by God and by the General's acts of atrocity. In African contexts, explanations of madness have two complementary attributes: madness is a means of communication between spiritual and material worlds and, specifically in Arabic terms, madness is said to be a mirror of wisdom: The insane, observes Saint-André Utudjian, have particular gifts and are often called upon by the occult powers to assist in secret missions.40 Perceived thus, madness is a vehicle through which supra-human forces can affect this-worldly events. Farah explains other ideas on the subject in local folk wisdom.

In Islam madness occupies a mystical position. The mad as opposed to the wise. And there's an Arabic proverb, not Islamic, but Arabic, which translates as "all people who receive wisdom from the mouths of the mad remain sane." The mad are also a mirror to the sane. You look at yourself in them, and ask why they have become as they are, and how you have remained untouched. And in Islam, you are supposed to thank God for being spared.41

Mukhtaar's transformation is an expression of a private psychological failure that


reflects society’s inability to prevent the regime’s abhorrent acts. Instead of remaining outside the savagery of clan rivalries, as he had wished, Mukhtaar is outraged by the appointment of his own father as his murderer. Mukhtaar’s derangement recalls Khalif’s overnight transition to insanity and causes Deeriye to ask: “Why is it that they hear voices from their unrecognisable selves, voices which originate from deep down in their victimized existences?” (120). However, Mukhtaar’s death intervenes before he has a chance to experience the numinous voices that pervade the novel’s main figure of madness, Khalif. Written into Deeriye’s every waking hour, Khalif’s enigmatic figure exerts a curiously powerful effect on his audience during his insane street appearances. His aphorism, “Night plots conspiracies daylight never reveals” (15), is emblematic of his divided nature as he strides out of dawn, “half his face painted white and the other half dark” (14). Balanced between inspiration and incoherence, prophecy and denunciation, Khalif acts as Deeriye’s symbolic double and, as such, plays a crucial role in the novel’s denouement. But, along the way, manifestations of madness are not reserved for the categorically insane.

In Qur’anic terms, Muhammad’s initial revelations of God’s message were mistaken for demonstrations of madness and, in Somali contexts, the Sayyid and Wiil-Waal generated change through acts and poetry that are acknowledged to be both saintly and mad. When Deeriye thinks over the low morality of his contemporaries at the Baar Novecento, he concludes that “they are the kind of men who would describe as mad any person who tries to effect an improvement in the lives of his or her fellows; any revolutionary or visionary would have frightened them to death” (98). In contrast with Wiil-Waal and the Sayyid’s inspired madness, the General’s insanity is irreligious, even blasphemous. Indeed, Khalif denounces the General because he “never accept[s] His word as the Sacred Message but ... force[s] people to go to Orientation Centres instead of mosques and ... ask[s] to be worshipped in His place” (220). Moreover, this man, who lusts for the power of a god, inflicts drugs and tortures on suspected dissenters, causing them to go insane. Those who oppose the General are “mad” because they put themselves in danger and, at the same time, those who follow the General, like Sheikh Ibrahim and the
Sacred Breath and Unfinished Narratives

un-neighbourly Cigaal, commit "mad" inhumane acts against human dignity. Thus madness becomes another means by which Farah establishes the divided and partial nature of consciousness from a secular standpoint.

In symbolic terms, madness and breath form a paradigm which correlates with the crippling condition of Deeriye's diseased lungs because the old man's asthma proves to be both debilitating and, as we shall see, enlightening. Farah explains asthma's function in Close Sesame to be in direct relationship to political and moral inertia: "a symbol of that enclosure, of refusing, in view of old age, and the political situation, to come out and be free." Asthma undermines Deeriye's religious discipline, restricts his participation in the country's political affairs and, in the narrative context, removes him from the main events of Mogadiscio life. As such, the illness provides a metaphoric variation on the godly and god-less extremes of madness because, during attacks, Deeriye is as absent from life as the General, in his life, is absent from God. In a similar vein, asthma represents the opposite of God's pervading spirit since the illness inhibits the respiratory system. Expanding on this metaphor, Farah employs the disease in a counter revelation that occurs in the latter moments of the plot. In the final analysis, asthma is a symbol of spiritual closure and imperfect knowledge, a condition that is more effectively relieved by visions of Nadiifa than by Zeinab's medicinal administrations. I shall argue that the focus of the narrative changes when the breath of Nadiifa's spirit sets Deeriye's impaired soul free.

The tension in the novel between the mandate of God and the bedevilled material world of politics is related to Farah's exploration of absence and presence. On God's side of the continuum, everything tends to evoke the presence of the unknowable, made accessible in visions and family cohesiveness. People, nature and the cosmos are one and God's presence is manifest in a joyous correspondence of aesthetic and spiritual symbols. In contrast, the satanic forces, epitomised by the General, generate a shortage of information and a kind of moral infection which (like Deeriye's asthma) constricts liberty. From the profane point of view, murder

42 Jaggi, 185.
eliminates dissenters of the regime and death is understood to be a clear case of total absence.

Notions of exclusion and elimination are, as the Qur'an emphasises in the sura Yā-Sīrīs metaphorical language, inconsistent with the signs given in the natural world:

38. And a sign for them is the night from which We strip off the day, and lo! they are in darkness.

39. And the sun is moving on the course prescribed for it. That is the decree of the Almighty, the All-knowing God.

40. And for the moon We have appointed stages, till it becomes again like an old dry branch of a palm-tree.

41. It is not for the sun to overtake the moon, nor can the night outstrip the day. All of them float in an orbit. (my emphasis)⁴³

Khalifatul II interprets the interdependency of night and day as an indication that spiritual darkness will inevitably be dispelled by the arrival of a prophet, but I find Farah's application of the sacred symbols to be more faithful to the original. Light and darkness float together in the contours of Deeriye's room, prison and imagination and thus indicate the inclusive nature of Farah's art. Samawade enters his grandfather's room "which the sun's rays had cut in half, making the section in which Deeriye had been sitting darker than the other into which now Samawade walked" (27). The child and the old man, the next generation and the former, the future's promise and yesterday's failure, are at once separated and united as integral parts of the larger vision.

In prison, Deeriye keeps his mind's eye on "a door of light in all that darkness, a door which helped him see the outside: a door of friendship, of love, of Roobles, of Elmi-Tiirs, of Nadiifas; a lighthouse in the direction of which one

moved when the storm tore into one's soul, one's lungs" (31). The mystical transference of light where darkness normally resides is counter-weighted, in his memory of internment, by the photographer's flash-lamp which penetrated his consciousness like a bullet. "There was that thing the white man held up in his left hand, a thing which lit like a lamp, a thing which produced a flash whose life was brief. Then came darkness in its wake" (39). Moreover, the metaphors of light and shade parallel the novel's notions of absence and presence, since both figurative sets are ineffable, seamless and inclusive of each other. As one of Deeriye's prime preoccupations, absence is a psychological outcome of his twelve years in prison which separated him from his family and diminished his contribution to national resistance movements. Asthmatic blackouts further contribute to Deeriye's sense of absence, yet, at a more penetrating glance, absence is but a sign of presence. Like light and darkness, absence and presence can only be defined through recourse to their binary opposites, wherein absence is where presence is not. Therefore, Deeriye's absence from the family photograph is equal to his presence in prison or, in the vast cosmic scheme, Allah's absence from an assumed corporeal form equals a presence in the mysterious other-time and other perspectival world. Close Sesame's quintessential manifestation of the paradox of presence and absence as an indivisible phenomenon between two worlds is, as discussed earlier, Nadiifa the vision.

Thus far, the discussion has examined Close Sesame's unique motif designs and cohesive thematic concerns, demonstrating the pervasive influence of the Qur'an throughout the narrative. Now it is time to consider the novel's system of belief, construed in half-truths and divided natures, plurality and symbolism, in terms of Deeriye's final destination.

the counter revelation

Mursal's disappearance causes a change of pace in this principally contemplative style of novel. Instead of confining himself to family deliberations on events that take place at a remove, Deeriye is forced to participate in the action. Firstly, there is the spontaneous act of apology and compassion extended to
Natasha, whose confusion and sense of isolation at Mursal's disappearance has turned to anger. When Deeriye hugs Natasha's knees and begs her forgiveness in a language that she understands, he dispels the emotional pressure of the moment and draws the fragmenting family together again. This incident and his dream communication with Samawade suggest that Deeriye instinctively prepares the women and children for the time when they must continue the struggle alone.

Then Nadiifa surfaces in the narrative, not only as his "secret-sharer" but to direct him into action: "Avenge your son. Let the powerful heat of your anger persuade you, don't wait until it cools. Then come and join me" (227). Again, Farah's phrasing and italicisation significantly separate the act of revenge from that of death in a movement which gives death the greater value. The rendezvous with Nadiifa is equal to the "having become another" of the drive sequence, which clearly defines death as the threshold to the next journey. However, the most vital change concerns what I call the "counter-revelation" that Nadiifa instigates when she informs Deeriye that "your lung is your soul" (226). The term "counter" denotes the peculiarity of this revelation which, as will become apparent, both informs Deeriye of his perceptual failing and alters the focus of the text. Farah withholds the full implication of the link between lung and soul until other puzzles and communications are addressed.

After the exchange with Nadiifa, two facts are given and one decision is made: Deeriye takes charge of Mursal's revolver and the General's telephone contact because he is ready to avenge his son's death. He then responds to Scheherezade's news of Khaliif's sane and uniformed visit with a spirited invitation to his grandchildren:

"Would you like to join us? We are meeting the General," said Deeriye.

With Cantar in front and the other three following, they went down, step by step, prepared for anything, four persons—one very old and three very young, four men and one woman: ready as a delegation from the world of the
mad, to meet the sane (234).

Who is meant by Deeriye's "we" and why does four become five? The only feasible explanation seems to be that Deeriye invites his grandchildren to join an already enlisted Khaliif and himself in the delegation. Therefore, the second figure is a symbolic composition of two saintly elders and the three children who, together, represent the means to human continuity—the aged to transmit and the young to accept cultural and communal knowledge. Moreover, the five constitute the enduring force that moves against the terribly sane General, in the present and through the future. Injustice, Farah implies, is counteracted by small inspired acts of resistance, for the General can only be undermined by the persistence of "the power of moral and spiritual pressure."44

Leaving the house for the last time, Deeriye is still a sick man, frightened that an asthmatic attack might forestall his intentions. Yet, in the narrator's final perusal of Deeriye's thoughts, this fear is superseded by Farah's indication that Khaliif's symbolic presence permeates the prophetic tone and turn of phrase with which Deeriye voices the solution to his own puzzle.

"All our lives, mortals that we are, we misname things and objects, we misdefine illnesses and misuse metaphors. Why, it is not my lungs: my face! Why, this suggests a loss of face, the loss of reputation, and nothing more than that! Why, this doesn't suggest the loss of faith, the spiritual loss, the spiritual famine which envelops one—right from the moment hundreds of heads of cattle rolled. I didn't lose face: I lost faith, yes, faith, in my own capability, faith in my people." ... "Nadiifa," he said to himself silently now, "spoke of my lungs as my soul ... Which perhaps means

44 An expression used by the Aboriginal poet Kevin Gilbert in the context of the fight for indigenous people's rights which I find apt for Farah's trust in the powers of humane justice. Blackout (ABC Television) 23 November, 1993.
that she believes that my soul is struggling, has been struggling to free itself and join its Creator from the day the Italians made the cattle's heads roll ... so it can join Nadiifa and prepare for the eventual rollcall of names of the pious when these souls will be one with their Creator" (235).

In a swift redefinition, the plot is changed into a tale of a man's discovery of his innermost spiritual nature wherein truth has lain, in the psychological blind-spot of his asthma, since that day when abhorrent human behaviour had shaken his faith. Instead of political justice, the question on which the novel revolves is Deeriye's ailing faith and its symbolic analogue, his lung disease. The General and his politics are still formidable foes, but Deeriye's crucial enemy is his human spiritual blindness. Although this revelation occurs in the final stages of his narrative, Farah supplies, as in detective genres, all the clues with which to accept the changes as psychologically and textually sound. Throughout, Farah has taken care to demonstrate an inherent duality in Deeriye's life: his willing obedience and delight in Islamic observances lie, side by side, with his engagement in familial and community concerns. This behaviour, divided between two worlds, anticipates the division of his faith as realised in the revelation, for, although Deeriye's faith is intuitively sound, his perception of that faith is shown to be faulty. Divisions and half-truths are conceptually tied to speculations on history's uncertainties and, ultimately, to the divine and secular duality of the human condition.

arrival at another destination

Asthma is a bodily illness which often absents Deeriye from the activities of the material world. At the spiritual level, asthma is symbolic of a similar deprivation with regard to Deeriye's understanding of his faith in God. However, through Nadiifa's prompting, asthma becomes the catalyst which reveals the old man's genuine spiritual health and his desire to meet the Creator in his love of Nadiifa. At
this high point of revelation, Farah removes narratorial privilege and leaves Deeriye's destiny to rumour and imagination. The old man, like Raju, enters the paradoxical supra-human space--metaphorically, the open space within Farah's mosque of words--with no direct account of the meeting with the General given.

Details of his movements are locked in a puzzle but we can gain an insight into Deeriye's intentions and Farah's vision by examining the clues. The only certainty available, from the moment he presses the unidentified doorbell until the failed assassination, is Deeriye's communication with Khaliif and the uniform which they seem to share. As previously suggested, Khaliif is the novel's symbolic figure of half-truth, half-madness and half-sanctity who continually reflects Deeriye's state of mind. Given this divided symbolism and Farah's concern with the secular as but half of the human potential, I suggest that Khaliif's schizophrenic experience is tantamount to a ritualistic threshold across which Deeriye must go to attain his goal. Furthermore, Deeriye's act of vindication must be a joyous and inspired act of madness in which the secular half of human nature is sloughed so that the sacred whole can be realised. Whether the prayer beads substitute or constrain the revolver at the precise moment when Deeriye appears to make an assassination attempt on the General's life is inconsequential, because it is the irrationality of the act that transforms death into a holy embrace of "another" departure.

On a more pragmatic level, Deeriye's ostensible failure to carry out his plan contains the paradoxical power of martyrdom which "aims to reduce political authority to ineffectiveness by challenging the basis of the legitimacy of the adversary authority," provided that the catalytic act is public. Arguably, Deeriye's end could be interpreted as the delusions of an old man who tried to be a hero. On the other hand, God's beads, superimposed on the revolver, can be seen as a sign of Allah's condemnation of the General and this image raises Deeriye's act to the status of martyrdom, an act which constitutes the most esteemed profession of faith in Muslim cultures. Even if only circulated through avenues of rumour, Deeriye's

reputation as a national hero and the religious significance of the beads pose a potent challenge to the General's legitimacy. This situation is the antithesis of Soyaan's fate in *Sweet and Sour Milk*, where the General was able to construct a false reputation for Soyaan because that young man had veiled his activities in secrecy. Deeriye's alliance with traditional Islam and Somali nationalism are publicly established, making his martyrdom into an unalterable fact. Concurrently, the family's perception of Deeriye's heroism confers a symbiotic blessing on the women and children who are now responsible for the earthly maintenance of morality and love.

Through his portrait of Deeriye, Farah suggests that the only way to undermine repressive political systems is by the maintenance of moral and spiritual integrity. This ethical method is not fail-safe, but it is the only path available to a humanity who wish to retain the meaning of that designation. Even when the target is the figure who spreads his malignancy across a nation, an eye for an eye—the *lex talonis* of traditional law—is unjustifiable because vengeance forces the innocent to commit crimes. Furthermore, in qur'anic terms punishment, as Farah states in his defence of Salman Rushdie, is a matter that God will settle: "God is powerful, He punishes, He will punish, and then let the matter rest in God's hands. This is much more Islamic."46 Premeditated strikes of violence under the banner of justice fail and Farah places the only hope for Somalia's deliverance in the inspired madness and martyrdom of an old man of God.

Like forensic evidence, the contents of Deeriye's pockets are further clues through which to piece together *Close Sesame*’s parting messages. The list encapsulates those things which Deeriye intended to be made public: his self-assured identity and political affiliations; his devotion to his wife and Somalia's traditional saintly heroes, and, before all else, his submission to God. Beneath these public messages, Farah continues to generate symbolic meaning, most markedly through Deeriye's tattered copy of *Ya-Sin*, sura 36 of the Qur'an which manifests three interconnected attributes that are central to *Close Sesame*. Regarded as "the

46 Jaggi, 182.
heart of the Qur'an," Ya-Sin reiterates "the central figure in the teaching of Islam and the central doctrine of Revelation and the Hereafter" and is thus an appropriate companion for solemn ceremonies after death.  

This indicates Deeriye's cognisance of his death as he prepared for his confrontation with the General. Furthermore, the "Abbreviated Letters Ya-Sin" are usually construed as a title of the Prophet, although "it is not possible to be dogmatic about the meaning." Again, Farah foregrounds the text's ambiguity, even intimating, in this instance, the close relationship between Deeriye's life and the Prophet's concealed name. Jean-Pierre Durix consolidates the connection between the two men, at opposite ends of Islamic history, through his reading of Ya-Sin: "Deeriye in his mission as dreamer, visionary, prophet of Truth and sacrificial victim, evokes Allah's envoy who in the thirty-sixth sura of the Koran, was nearly stoned to death for preaching the Divine Word." Although certain qur'anic commentators propose that the parable's "messenger" is Muhammad, identification with the Holy Prophet remains speculative because the allusion is not specific. I am more inclined to believe that Farah models Deeriye on the single old man amongst the disbelievers who

was just a simple honest soul, but he heard and obeyed the call of the apostles and obtained the spiritual desire for himself and did his best to obtain salvation for his people. For he loved his people and respected his ancestral traditions as far as they were good, but he had no hesitation in accepting the new Light when it came to him.


48 Ibid.


50 Yusef Ali's exegesis of Ya-Sin, sura 36.20-27; vol.3.1176.
If Deeriye's change of heart from non-violence to active participation is equated with the lone man's conversion to a new Islamic faith, then Deeriye is indeed modelled on the honest soul of the parable. Nonetheless, the two old men, symbolic of all pious Muslims, resemble the Prophet, for all are receptacles of God's messages and all hold their submission to Allah as their most valued human trait. Consequently, Close Sesame re-invokes, if enigmatically and personally, the coming of God's word to humankind.

Close Sesame is a record of Somalia's political crisis of the eighties, a polemic on piety and a critical exposition on language, but it is first and foremost a story of a vibrant Islamic heritage. Throughout the novel, Farah describes secular natures and invokes human sanctity through half-realised and plural visions. As a consequence, solutions to the narrative's many puzzles about time, madness and absence are ultimately denied because human knowledge is, by definition, partial. Nonetheless, through the novel's use of the Qur'an's breath symbolism, Farah creates a mosque of words that testifies to Allah's sacred presence. If fears of a diseased society remain, Farah implies that those anxieties belong to the secular realm of half-truth which will never become whole. Above all else, Deeriye lives in his attainment of quintessential unity in death, "having become another," while his standing as a martyr inspires people's small yet persistent acts of resistance against injustice. Finally, Farah's unfinished-narrative relays the sacred messages, once more, for the benefit of the imperfect human imagination.
PART TWO: DREAM ENVIRONMENTS AND SHAMANS
DREAM ENVIRONMENTS AND SHAMANS
Dreams and acts of dreaming inform the content and the structure of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*. Instead of the climactic liminality that characterise Raju's renunciation of his ego and Deeriye's embrace of an inspired madness, Head and Okri's narratives deal with altered states of consciousness as everyday occurrences. The regularity of dream experience is the only initial point of similarity shared by the two writers for their narrative tones and structures are quite distinct. Dreams of torture are, as it were, imposed on Head's protagonist Elizabeth whereas travelling through multiple worlds is a condition of the nature of Azaro, Okri's spirit-child or *abiku* narrator. Secondly, Head makes no concessions to the reader and enters the dreamscapes' altered sense of reality without warning, in contrast to Azaro who explains his unusual existential being and signposts his slippage from one realm into the next, albeit in surprising ways. These distinctions apart, the dream experiences of a South African female and a Nigerian male writer do have common points of reference which stem, I believe, from the status of dreams in African environments. A brief discussion of dreams in these contexts is thus necessary for an understanding of Head and Okri's texts.

Dream in its broadest definition is understood to be experience of altered or alternative states of consciousness which can occur while a person is asleep or awake. Concentrated as this study is on non-European contexts, dream forms cover much ground but bear no connotation of "daydreaming or reverie" which are clearly products of private fancy and imagination. Nonetheless, dreams are elusive and ephemeral phenomena that have generated a plethora of ideas and distinctive
systems of symbols which continue to defy explanation by scientific means. A cursory glance at the etymological roots of the English word "dream" reveals a generalised dichotomy persisting in the many ideas and beliefs that surround the subject. On the one hand, dreams are seen to be visual representations—ghosts, apparitions and other deceptive phenomena—generated by physiological and/or imaginative processes. On the other hand, dreams are explained in terms of sound in which murmurs and musical reverberations communicate vital messages from hidden or parallel realities. While the variance is due to a language shift over time rather than to a systematic study, the dichotomy is apt for my purposes. The visual and auditory difference figuratively represents the two bodies of knowledge applied to dreams: the first points to the social science of psychology which views dreams as the projections of the self on some sort of inner screen, while the second indicates the multitude of archaic lores which hold that dreams are the site of contact with the supra-human.

Western ideas have developed on the assumption inherent in the first view wherein dreams are products of individual and separate "egos" adjusting to the world beyond themselves. The formative figure of this paradigm, Sigmund Freud, contends that dreams contain codes or symbols that represent an individual's instinctive repression of pain. The recalled dream "represents a compromise between the fulfilment of a repressed wish and the wish to remain asleep." Today Freudian theories are criticised as unsystematic and biologically over-determined, yet the principle of repression remains central to a wide range of psychoanalytical positions. The other major figure in the field of dream and psychoanalysis, Carl Gustav Jung, deviates from Freud and empirical science and proposes that dream symbols are expressions of the "collective unconscious" or "archetypes". Jung's proposition interprets "big dreams" as "messages from the deepest layer of the unconscious ... [or] attempts on the part of the archetypes to express themselves."

2 Ibid.
In so doing, Jung's dream-therapy deals with influences beyond the personal "ego" and would therefore seem compatible with the auditory side of the etymological dichotomy described above. While Jung's theories are found wanting by psychoanalysts who espouse rational and empirical methodologies, his cross-cultural archetypes and notions about the "collective unconscious" have been adapted by the disciplines of anthropology, literature and theology where those fields of inquiry involve the study of myth. Though much in Jung's theories concurs with the realms of African dreams, his symbolism tends to be biased towards European imagery and thus proves too narrow for the variety of communication modes explored in Head's and Okri's novels. Since Freud and Jung, dreams have been subject to many controversial explanations: scientists have pursued sleeping state "eye-movements" and the effects of chemical stimulation on the brain but, apart from information gained about the "structure, dynamics, and abnormalities of human personality," the phenomenon of dream remains a contentious issue on scientific grounds.

Outside empiricism's relatively rigid frame, dream phenomena are manifold expressions of interactions with other worlds. Dreams and nightmares, hallucinations and visions, are seen as spirit possession, soul journeys, prophecy, witchcraft and sorcery. Some hierophants heal or protect communities, others emanate from oppositional evil forces and spread malignancy and disease, but all variations of dream maintain individuals in an ongoing communion with the cosmic flux. Cultures that are sophisticated in psychic phenomena treat spiritual guidance and healing as the two most significant outcomes of the form of knowledge attained when natural and supra-human powers fuse in the dream state and "break the bondage of natural time and space." This breakthrough finds one of its most abstract philosophical expressions developed in the Hindu notion of māyā which, in a sense, takes its ground reality from dreams or altered states of

3 Ibid 390.

consciousness and thus inverts empirical versions of reality. Non-substance creates substance—or the illusion of substance—that acts as a topology of the greater possibilities which it conceals. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty describes *māyā* as encapsulated in the paradox of the dreamer dreamt, wherein there is established a "mutual feedback system between finding (dreaming what is already there) and making (dreaming something into existence)."\(^5\)

Indian philosophy implies that we find it because we *are* it, even as we are God. Since the Indian universe is made of God's body, as well as God's mind, any act of scientific or artistic creation is literally a self revelation. In this context, the correlation between making something and finding it is hardly a coincidence, it is just common sense.\(^6\)

The diverse dream-worlds found across the length and breadth of Africa tend to be less esoteric and more bodily substantial than those subject to Hinduism's enigmatic *māyā*. Nonetheless, African dream worlds manifest people's belief in the powers to be found in naming and dreaming for both phenomena are considered to be practices that tap into the dangerous and infinite resources of the cosmos. At the same time, existential categories in African environments are defined by circumstance rather than by preconceived delineations. Consequently, dividing lines between spirit possession and prophetic vision or between positive and negative forces are invariably tentative or contradictory. Dreams principally convey voices to be heard and obeyed, since it is much more propitious to take heed of the multitude of signs from the ancestors, spirits and deities than to ignore their urgent demands. Dreams predict and torment; dreams cross into other realities that are the sites for ritual healing; dreamselfs travel out of bodies, and sorcerers, gods,

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6 Ibid.
goddesses, spirits and the dead physically enter the dreamer's presence. Finally, dreaming transgresses states of chaos and contacts the highest supra-human authority.

Concepts of *māyā* and altered states of consciousness are derived from worldviews which posit that there are a number of co-existent realms nested in the cosmos. Unlike the Islamic notion on which Farah seizes for *Close Sesame*, wherein earthly experience is but one stage of a greater whole, numerous African cosmologies privilege the earth and its spirit/s as the centre of a holistic cosmos, no matter how infinite the reaches and guises of that cosmos may be. Simplistically, this earth-centred conceptualisation can be seen to operate within a sphere in contrast to Islamic and other major theological concepts that posit human life on a trajectory, or journey, from one sphere to the other. The latter usually implies some form of hierarchical progression, while the former tends towards lateral and communal constructs. Hinduism's notion of reincarnation, of an endless spiral of rebirths ascending or descending the experiential ladder to the gods, oscillates between the concepts of the sphere and that of the trajectory. As we have seen with Narayan's Raju, there is no single formula for the progression that occurs within a single life but the way is firmly marked in the Hindu consciousness as the journey which proceeds through the cyclic cosmic dance. The notion of a journey extends to the concept of reincarnation wherein a series of rebirths leads, according to the amount of merit gained at each stage, to the eventual attainment of *nirvana* or "eternal bliss." In *A Question of Power*, Head develops the concept of reincarnation through her idea that the condition of the soul can be improved in the next rebirth and, at once, she views each rebirth as the reappearance of the soul which is the sum of all its former lives. But Head has to resolve the issue of the system's dependence on a hierarchical "caste" structure which she regards as the religion's moral flaw.

Thus, the belief system which emerges from *A Question of Power* can be explained as a syncretisation of Christian quest, Hindu reincarnation and an African earth-centred cosmos: God is brought down from the elevated power of the
heavens to abide within the ordinary human heart. Okri, similarly, works against any reification of power structures and his earth-centred world is unmistakably crowded with the ubiquitous transformations that originate in traditional West African beliefs. These transformations resemble the multiple possibilities available in notions such as reincarnation and the dreamer-dreamt phenomenon of māyā.

**non-rational apprehension**

To find some means of describing the mode of communication which occurs in altered states of consciousness, I wish to recall the reader's attention to the discussion of Cassirer's mythico-religious thought and Soyinka's mythopoeic perception in the introduction to this study. The main points of relevance here are Cassirer's notion of a perceptual mode in which all phenomena are seen as a single concentrated whole, causing words to be indistinguishable from the objects they describe, and Soyinka's notion of the fusion of sound and meaning in liminal states of consciousness. As long as we disregard his evolutionary cultural frame, Hans Duerr's attempts to articulate alternative modes of apprehension also deserve consideration. He claims that there exists an "archaic and pre-analytical mode of perception which can be called 'synthetic' or 'syn-aesthetic'." From an analytical point of view, the "syn-aesthetic" mode appears to bring together or confound components which "basically have nothing to do with each other." Significantly, the "syn-aesthetic" mode of perception is thus described as "madness" or "fantasy," labels that are frequently used to describe A Question of Power and The Famished Road respectively. Duerr recognises the validity of "syn-aesthetic" modes, which he associates with the knowledge processes of shamanism, and adds that an over-emphasis on analytical thought has led modern generations to expect knowledge to arrive by "free home delivery and while consuming it, we forget that truth has

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He emphasises this point with the story of Rasmussen's encounter with an Eskimo shaman who curtails the interview with "You do not know that only the person who seeks solitude and suffers can have any insights!" This shaman of few words could well be one of Elizabeth's teachers on the paths of quest and initiation where wisdom bears within itself its own terrible responsibility. Moreover, since shamans are exemplary dream travellers, it would seem helpful to explore where these psychic experts stand in relation to matters of perception. As Phillip Peek inquires: "how can we possibly gain an understanding of contemporary African peoples and their ongoing search for sufficient knowledge to complete their life patterns unless we try to understand their sources of knowledge, their ways of knowing?"

Shamanic vision, according to Michel Hamer, a practitioner, is described in ways which aim to differentiate this form of "seeing" from everyday perception. People variously refer to the psychic perceptual mode as seeing through the "third eye"; the "strong eye"; a "seeing with the heart"; 'it is a type of 'vision' which can be done with the eyes closed." The Yansi of Zaire say that "you have a head of dreams,' that is, 'through your head events to come or which have passed announce themselves," while the Temne believe that certain people possess a "four-eyed" vision, "in which the two visible eyes of ordinary people are

8 Ibid 130.
9 Ibid.
supplemented by two invisible eyes.13 The metaphors used to describe the alternative mode of perception suggest that shamanic vision can be, in the context of my definition of terms, the means to apprehend and interact with the supra-human. I would further note that I use the shamanic denomination to encompass all healing specialists--diviners, herbalists, oracles, seers and priests--whose practices entail recourse to altered states of consciousness. Harner and associates point out that shamanism is not a religion but a healing practice without dogmatic trappings. A basic definition of the practice from an Hawaiian shaman, Serge King, confirms this line of thinking: "the shaman uses altered states of consciousness to communicate with and influence the forces of nature and the universe for the benefit of society. In order to do this, the shaman everywhere practices the accumulation of inner power ... [mana]."14 However, what are the "forces of nature and the universe" and "inner power" if not that which is beyond, or different from, powers available at a material level of existence? Shamanism is not a religion with comprehensive sets of creation myths, doctrinal requirements and laws, but shamans do heal through their belief in the efficacy of relationships established between the inner spirit and the supra-human forces found in the cosmos. Mihály Hoppál makes this aspect clear when he discusses the shaman's role as a symbolic mediator between human and supra-human spheres:

The shaman as a mediator is placed at those critical points where the human and suprahuman spheres do indeed overlap. The shaman's activity covers the liminal spheres of the world which are dangerous for ordinary human beings and for shamans as well. His or her mediating


activity relies on beliefs in symbolically taking all the difficulties (pain, sickness, responsibility of decision-making etc) upon himself or herself. All these observations and data truly stress the utmost significance of the symbolic aspects of the mediation process.15

The Head and Okri narratives under discussion are equally concerned with altered states of consciousness and symbolic mediation of the supra-human forces for the benefit of their respective communities. However, the different material found in their psychic genres indicates an important distinction in their relationship to shamanism. In my reading of the novels, Head becomes a shaman-like healer at the completion of writing A Question of Power, whereas Okri promotes the use of shaman-like perception in order to heal Nigeria's problems through the structure and content of the narrative itself. Viewed from this angle, Head's novel is a case study of the election of a spiritual healer as distinct from the Okri novels that present an imaginative vision of shamanic methods. Before following the direct shamanic implications in Head's and Okri's work, I would like to pose a question regarding the issue of symbolic mediation. What sort of symbols are we dealing with in mediating between the inexplicable and the human realms?

A reasonable place to begin the inquiry is with Mircea Eliade's hypothesis of origins in which he proposes that humankind continually seeks to express an "idealism" envisaged to exist at the time of creation. In order for individuals and communities to share in this creative force, people must re-create the world or, phrased differently, the group's symbolic vocabulary needs to be constantly renewed: "To cure the work of Time it is necessary to 'go back' and find the

'beginning of the World'. The process, according to Eliade, involves a re-enactment of the monumental struggles between the deities (goodness) and the mythic figures of revolt (evil) that took place at the time of creation. Hélène Cixous expands upon one aspect of Eliade's thesis when she conceives the feminine approach to the archetypal journey back through conflict, not as Eliade suggests to the source, but to the territory of the unknown which lies beyond the source: "She does not flee extremes, she is not the being-of-the-end (the goal), but she is how-far-being-reaches." Though I refrain from using Cixous's proposal to divide thought patterns and psychic make-up into generalised masculine and feminine categories, I do find the notion of pushing past imaginable form to be appropriate to the narratives addressed in this study. Head's text is a clear example of Cixous's woman testing the possibility of being, while Okri explores perception itself as a never-ending penetrative possibility. Eliade's ideas suggest rediscovering the symbols of origins, whereas Cixous's search is for undiscovered or, perhaps, forgotten symbols.

While Eliade appears to assume that good and evil are somehow determined and recognisable categories, John Mbiti, in his survey of religious activity in Africa, is much more mindful of the contradictions that pervade the "power in the universe" which people understand as emanating from a mysterious and hidden God. Confusion arises when the power is channelled through the medium of men and women who variously utilise its properties for good or bad ends. Specialists facilitate human relations with the cosmos, but individuals can, and do, exploit both the knowledge and the people that rely on that knowledge for


corrupt or "witchcraft" purposes. For this reason, Head in her social development mode can conclude that the endless round of village life is a cycle of "accusation and counter-accusation and psychological fears." Here, Rudolf Otto's notion of "mysterium tremendum et fascinans" is useful because he identifies the issue of good and evil with a sense of duality gleaned from our "non-rational" experience of the numinous. In his book, The Idea of the Holy, Otto claims that he has made "a serious effort to analyse all the more exactly the feeling which remains where the concept fails." He describes this feeling or "over-plus of meaning" as our twofold response to a "holy" or "numinous" presence. Where Cassirer's sense of mythico-religious mode posits a holistic "concentration" of thought, Otto believes that the human response to the numinous "whole" is confounded in a duality. In the numinous presence, we are "overwhelmed by [our] own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures." Our response to the numinous involves both awe--as is experienced in wonder, love or in the apprehension of a sense of the sublime--and the "element of awefulness" or "mysterium tremendum" which instils fear, dread and even terror in the beholder. What is vital to recognise here is that the duality leads to our sense of evil and goodness which, rather than being constituted in the numinous entity or force itself, emerges in our response to the supra-human. The response, in short, is a form of symbolic mediation which, I believe, is equally pertinent to Eliade's proposition. Notions of goodness and evil, for example, need to be constantly renegotiated in people's minds in order that the meaning of those ideas be maintained. Head's encounter with good and evil and Okri's descriptions of the destructive and regenerative forces that influence the people of the ghetto are forms of symbolic mediation. In each


21 Ibid 10.
instance, the authors use the metaphorical language of this world in response to an out-of-this-world experience (Head) or idea (Okri). Furthermore, the received sense of the dichotomy of goodness and evil that arises from an experience of the numinous will in time be made manifest in human activities, such as making use of numinous powers for beneficial or destructive ends.

In a related sense, symbols assume idiosyncratic connotations according to group or personal usage. For example, my claim that Head, through Elizabeth, becomes a shaman-like figure at the novel's completion would seem to contradict Head's description of Elizabeth's psychic breakthrough as the "revelation" of a prophet: "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet." Head's choice of terminology is a direct play on Muhammad's sacred pronouncement when he received the Qur'an. At this point in the narrative, Elizabeth has received the words of a god too, although this supra-human entity is not the patriarch of Islam but a magical force within the ordinary person. Head's usage of "prophet" corresponds to Victor Turner's definition wherein a prophet is an innovator and reformer, for [s]he confronts a tightly structured order that is moribund and points the way to religious forms that will either provide an intensified cognitive dynamic for sociocultural change or codify the new moral, ideational, and social structures that have been inarticulately developing.

Turner's definition is dictated by his position on social formation and change for although he places shamans and prophets together as mediums who both


"communicate in a person-to-person manner ... [in] what Buber would describe as an I-thou relationship with the deities and spirits," he differentiates between the two by virtue of the type of society from which they originate. According to Turner, shamans are neither radicals nor reformists because the flexibility and mobility of hunter-gatherer societies do not warrant such extreme resolutions. I find these distinctions to be artificial constructs of his social anthropological discipline which obscure his keener insights into the religious specialist's means of contact and his/her role of moral guardianship within the community. In other words, my definition of shamanism has a broader base, shaped by Head's clear preoccupation with people who possess "a hunger after the things of the soul" (11). My definition brings prophets, holy men, seers, marabouts, witches and mediums together under the rubric of the shaman.

In Head's case, the parallels between psychosis (the two mental breakdowns that the narrative records) and the shaman initiation rites are most illuminating. From our cultural frame, shamanic behaviour is often considered to be "psychotic and hysterical." On the other hand, those with inside knowledge of the cultural system interpret physiological abnormalities, such as a "high fever, swelling of either the limbs or the entire body, prolonged unconsciousness, and inability to eat," as signs "that the sufferer is destined, singled out by an agency of the sacred ranges of reality, for a future as a religious specialist." The affliction of both mind and body will continue until the elect accepts the responsibilities of shamanism, conveyed through trance-dreams and traditional education. "Acceptance" on the elect's behalf prompts Eliade's observation that the initiates are thus legitimate

24 Ibid 83.

25 Ibid 84.


Dream Environments and Shamans

healers "because they know the mechanism, or rather, the theory of illness."28 This knowledge is necessary because a shaman is said to guard "the community's 'soul,' [she] alone 'sees' it, for [she] knows its 'form' and its destiny."29

All of these characteristics, I will argue, are consistent with Elizabeth's experience for she is elected by Sello to wrestle with the cosmic forces and to become the prophetic healer of herself and the community. There may be objections to this proposal on the grounds that, in the first place, Elizabeth appears more "possessed" than in control of the forces and, in the second place, that Head never makes any reference to ideas on "shamanism". My response to the former is that careful analysis will show that possession coincides with the ordeals of initiation and that once Elizabeth has been pummelled, abused and pushed to the edge by the evil forces, there is an abundance of textual evidence to show that she maintains the moral strength to wrest herself from danger and find the gift of insight which heals. On the other issue, I would reply that an experience which is intensely felt by a private human being does not have to be described under a label which connects it with similar phenomena around the world or in time. If I see a valid connection, I make it analytically to elucidate the text and to accentuate the novel's role in healing Head's own fractured sense of identity, caused by her status as a "Coloured" person in South Africa, and her subsequent role as a narrative healer for the villagers of Serowe.

The abiku novels describe shaman-like figures too. On the one hand, there is Dad and, on the other, there is Madame Koto, although all of the ghetto's characters have some experience in mediating supra-human forces. Similar to Raju's unorthodox journey to holiness, Dad acquires his healing potency not directly through apprenticeship with his father, the Priest of the Road, but through detours that result from his obsession with boxing. In contrast, Madame Koto resembles the Yoruba witchcraft specialists, "the mothers," whose powers are said

29 Ibid 8.
to be variously beneficial or unfavourable with respect to the wider community. Throughout the course of the two novels, Madame Koto's aspirations to rise above the poverty of the ghetto and improve the status of women give way to an insatiable lust for wealth and power. Her selfish ambitions sever her links with the community and subject her spirit to a dangerous state of imbalance. In many ways, the narratives follow a dialogic interplay between these two characters and their supra-human relations: Dad's incompetence in the face of social degradation is ultimately transformed by his fidelity to his spirit, while Madame Koto's managerial competence is transformed, in a negative sense, by her use of spiritual power for destructive ends. In his comparison of the two figures, Okri explores the same issues that provoked Mbiti's observation of the antithetical outcomes that can arise from mediating cosmic forces.

More significantly, Okri uses shamanic ideas in the construction of texts that describe incessant transformations and probe into the re-occurring imagery and meaning of dreams. *The Famished Road*, Okri claims, is "against the perception of the world as being coherent and therefore readable as a text. The world isn't really a text, contrary to what people like Borges says. It's more than a text. It's more akin to music." And music, for Okri, is metaphorically aligned to dreams, rivers and the African aesthetic "of possibilities, of labyrinths, of riddles—we love riddles—of paradoxes." In juxtaposing these ideas to explain the unusual shape of his narrative, Okri establishes the pattern of fluid signs or metaphors which permeate his novels. Consequently, instead of acting as a sequel to *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* is like a second ingress into the strange spaces found along the first novel's intersecting paths. In one sense, the narrative return replicates a shamanic journey's mediation of the numinous experience insofar as *Songs of Enchantment* probes the same altered states of consciousness in order to find a deeper level of meaning in those experiences. The narrative shape clearly


arises from Okri's profound concern for heightened perceptual abilities which may be capable of passing through the *māyā*-like surfaces of material knowledge into the wisdom of the spirit. Through such channels, the contemporary condition of disillusionment may be transformed into a just and harmonious future.

In this introduction, I have attempted to present certain dream-related issues that are relevant to the textual analysis of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*. Head's syncretisation of diverse belief systems and Okri's exploration of a Nigerian indigenous worldview both foreground the significance of dreams. Dreams, like myths, can be understood as modes of perception and thought which are characteristically holistic and yet are often misinterpreted as conditions of madness and fantasy by analytically-minded observers. In dream as in the origin myths, the spirit becomes involved in an archetypal struggle between good and evil. By the same token, good and evil may not be categories in their own right, but symbolic interpretations which explain the dichotomy felt in our responses to numinous presence. Finally, although also permeated with dangerous powers, dreams and dreamers are vital sources of healing. Those who enter altered states of consciousness and re-emerge with powers to heal their communities follow the ways of the shaman. Sensitised by her traumatic conception, Elizabeth, on behalf of the oppressed peoples of Africa, passes through hells to arrive at the magic of the ordinary. While Dad and Madame Koto variously test the grounds of psychic power, Okri's narratives explore the ways in which heightened perception can open our minds to forgotten responsibilities in order to transform our future interaction with society and the environment. Through their protagonists, Head and Okri use the language of dreams to evoke the resilience of the human spirit.
A WOVEN CLOTH OF SHATTERED LITTLE BITS: 
A QUESTION OF POWER AND THE LIFE OF BESSIE HEAD
... boldness and wisdom are spiritual qualities and the spirit is like wine or a flower ... [whose] unfoldment is slow and gradual. 

Bessie Head

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* is an intensely private text yet, at the same time, the writing is remarkably crafted, weaving within its fabric a myriad of fragments drawn from a wide range of human affairs. In contrast to the diversity of the material, Head's protagonist Elizabeth emerges from a traumatic collision of village and dream worlds with one disturbingly simple message: "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet." Such a conclusion should alert commentators to *A Question of Power*’s unabashed “soul” quest, but too often critics seize on the "shattered little bits" of Head's troubled life and thus lose sight of the labour devoted to the creation of the holistic, woven cloth.

The novel can be summarised as a detailed account of two mental breakdowns that Elizabeth lives through during a four-year period after her arrival with her son Shorty in the village of Motabeng, Botswana. She is a "Coloured" refugee from South Africa, haunted by a white mother whom she never knew because the woman was committed to an insane asylum when her illicit liaison with a black stable hand resulted in pregnancy. At birth, the infant was fostered to white, then "Coloured" families, leaving the mother in the asylum where she took her own life several years later. This account of events is the story of Head's life as she understood it to be. A recent article by Kenneth Stanley Birch, Bessie Head's biological uncle, reveals that the mother's insanity was not caused or invented because of extra-marital relations with an unknown African. The mother's mental

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condition seems to have been triggered by the tragic death of her four-year-old son, Head's elder half-brother, in 1919. Moreover, rather than committing suicide, Bessie Amelia Emery died naturally in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital. Though this information clarifies many of the anomalies regarding the white side of Head's parentage for commentators, the revelation cannot alter what Head herself dealt with in terms of misinformation about her background. Head's description of Elizabeth's troubled beginnings is, as far as she was concerned, autobiographical and therefore *A Question of Power* is permeated with the enigmatic relationship that prevails between the creator and the created. At the same time, while Head's denunciation of apartheid is a logical extension of her experience, her acute sensitivity towards issues of justice across the diverse communities of southern Africa seems to be the mark of a unique and deeply moral personality. It could be said that Head's sensibility owes much to the indeterminate and illegitimate legacy of her birth because, ultimately, her unmarked self-identity proves to be fertile ground for the singular transformation which Head achieves in the writing of *A Question of Power*.

The novel's plot--though not its narration--begins with Elizabeth and her son Shorty's arrival in Motabeng where Elizabeth has accepted a teaching position. Leaving South Africa on an exit visa had been a decision made in desperation, because the move had seemed the only means through which Elizabeth could distance herself from a failed marriage and the other stigmas of her past. Soon, however, those burdens weigh too heavily on her beleaguered spirit and her life, which had hitherto relied on a tenuous balance between black and white, sanity and insanity, self-identification and self-alienation, collapses. Her dreams, congested with endless selves, spill over into the uncomprehending rational world.

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3 Ibid 11.
where the obscenities that Elizabeth shrieks at the Batswana are attributed to insanity. After a short stay in hospital, she regains a semblance of practical strength only to find that her teaching position has been terminated. This misfortune soon proves advantageous, for the dismissal enables Elizabeth to join the gardening group and participate in the local cooperative schemes under the creative management of Eugene, an Afrikaans refugee. Her down-to-earth relationships with her son, her gardening partner Kenosi and the American volunteer Tom fuse with the garden’s slow, progressive rhythms to counterpoint the wild dissonance of her dreams. In spite of the sense of well-being garnered from her engagement with the earth and human friendships, the internal conflict moves inexorably to its denouement. The journey winds through extreme states of perversion and emotional abuse until the uncontrollable evil bursts again into the world of everyday affairs. On this occasion, Elizabeth beats an innocent old white lady and posts a notice accusing Sello—a village elder at the practical level of the narrative—of incest with his small daughter. Subsequently, Elizabeth is committed to psychiatric care although the process achieves little in the way of healing her tormented mind. Months pass by before she learns to play on the psychiatrist’s racism and, in so doing, to convince him of her sanity. Genuine recovery is attained when, encouraged by Shorty’s newly discovered ardour for football, Elizabeth makes an unconditional stand against her dreamscape tormentors. With her peace of mind restored, Elizabeth experiences a growing sense of self-identity and an affiliation with the land around her.

paradoxical conditions

Such a synopsis of the novel imparts little of my opening suggestion that A Question of Power is principally a soul quest. I have chosen to approach the text in this way because I wish to draw attention to the difference between what may be called the facts, as presented by the text, and the more impressionistic

4 Head, as a note to When Rain Clouds Gather, describes the Batswana as the Tswana people who live in Botswana.
communication of the narrative’s dreamspace wherein mighty conflicts rage. In many ways, the summary above lies outside the pivotal significance of Elizabeth’s inner worlds but, analytically, the realistic aspects provide a useful interpretive entry into the non-rational core of *A Question of Power*. Dreams are the substance and domain of Elizabeth’s quest, so in order to penetrate this “unknown, lovely and unpredictable” novel, commonsensical views have to give way to the unknown, the lovely and the unpredictable. The novel is labyrinthine and often confusing, though not in the self-reflexive style of complex map makers like Rushdie and Farah. The complexity occurs because Head creates her narrative through the unfamiliar filter of psychic imagery. Fluid, multi-layered and often contradictory, Head’s symbolism is of the order of a new language to be learned. From the novel’s opening words, Head forces the reader into a dream-mode, introducing rules of non-causal and non-analytic communication without giving those rules any decisive context. In other words, the reader has to learn to make sense of an alternative perceptual mode that closely resembles Duerr’s “syn-aestheticism” wherein unlikely components are "brought together" into a cohesive whole. By introducing Elizabeth through her “manifesto” or, as Arthur Ravenscroft describes it, through “a species of sealed orders for the reader,” Head enters into Elizabeth’s retrospective thoughts on the inner turmoil experienced at the novel’s end. This structural decision forces the reader into the unmarked territory of Elizabeth’s mind where characters who inhabit the dreamspace are confused with people in Elizabeth’s waking reality. Once Sello and Dan emerge as two foci amidst the host of Elizabeth’s internal selves and are recognised as distinct from their village look-alikes, the reader is initiated into an effective interpretive mode through which to apprehend Elizabeth’s altered states of consciousness. As a result, the audacious


opening attains its objective, leading the reader into the unpredictable passageways of Head's—or her protagonist's—mind.

So who are these two star players of the dream stage? Since Sello and Dan head the two parts of the novel, what is their role in the question of power that pervades Elizabeth's mind? Are they gods, aspects of the soul, ancestors or embodiments of goodness and evil? In one sense, they are all of these things while, in another, they are avatars of the soul assembled in a personality that is struggling to be wholly and truthfully free. To simplify matters, Sello can be said to be the soul-seeker, tempted with sacred hierarchical power and predisposed to private sexual passion. But his "personal poisons" make him indistinguishable, at times, from Dan's numinous force which possesses a blind and beautiful potency. Both are also Elizabeth herself and they all inhabit Elizabeth's mind. A further complication arises from the fact that Sello and Dan are also actual personalities in the village, the former reputed for his wisdom and the latter for his wealth. These two characteristics, which become highly elaborated in the psychic setting, are the only resemblance that these men share with their dream counterparts.

Aside from the general lack of identification between the villagers and their namesake dream actors, the Sello and Dan dream entities manifest a pervasive internal paradox. They are, at once, psychic images surfacing from within Elizabeth's consciousness and external forces that enter Elizabeth's mind. Head's initial description of the phenomenon clearly enunciates this idea: Elizabeth detects a presence in the room which "gave her a strange feeling of things being there right inside her and yet projected at the same time at a distance away from her" (22). The same sort of antithetical treatment emerges in Sello and Dan's relations with temporality. Within the parameters of language as a shared means of communication, a beginning is a marked point in time. Under these conditions, one could say that Elizabeth's dreams begin when the candle on the chair beside her bed metamorphoses into Sello the monk: the symbolic light becomes the holy persona. However, in the logic of dream, a beginning is a nonsensical concept because phenomena in this state abide in unending flux. Neither are the dream-state Sello and Dan confined within Elizabeth's sleeping states, since they walk with
her through Motabeng's days and clutter her home. Although the dream personae have a different kind of corporeality than the villagers they resemble, they exist, as it were, in actual time outside the boundaries of dream. In another extension of the temporal problematic, Sello, for example, is a whole series of characters who represent various historical and mythic movements. At the same time, each manifestation retains an individualistic aspect which influences the meanings negotiated in the dreamscapes. Head brings this anomaly into play when she alludes to Elizabeth's sense of Sello as "one who was simply picking up the threads of a long friendship that had been briefly interrupted at some stage" (24).

Less epistemologically challenging than spatial and temporal paradox, sexuality is, nonetheless, another issue that is subject to the special conditions of dream. From the beginning, Head establishes Elizabeth and Sello as twin souls with parallel inner lives. This disclosure about their "closely-linked destinies," hungering after the same "things of the soul," implies that sexuality is neutral or non-existent in spiritual matters (11-12). In public life, Head declined to adopt a feminist perspective and, due to her seclusion in the village of Serowe, she remained outside the influential gender movements of the seventies. Sexuality, in her terms, is an issue to be determined more by circumstance than by physiology. When Tom and Elizabeth engage in long philosophical discussions over Elizabeth's masculine intellectual temperament, Head's position seems curiously sexist, until it is explained in experiential terms. "Journeys into the soul," Elizabeth muses, "are not for women with children, not all that dark heaving turmoil. They are for men, and the toughest of them took off into the solitude of the forests and fought out their battles with hell in deep seclusion" (50). Motherhood responsibilities, in other words, are too vital to be disrupted by internal preoccupations. In the dreamspace, however, sexuality departs in two antithetical directions: on the one hand, sexual difference is abandoned while, at the other extreme, sexuality becomes synonymous with obscenity and repression. For interpreters, the worlds within Elizabeth's mind are thus pitted with epistemological minefields, as Head herself clearly appreciates when she comments in an interview that "if the book can be
faulted, it is because of the interpreter." The novel, in other words, is an interpretation or translation of the unfamiliar language of dream.

To follow the narrative through the dreamspace, paradox and mercurial forms have to be accommodated. It is a matter of allowing Sello the monk to shift amidst his thousand incarnations as he leads Elizabeth across the contradictory network of tracks which the human pursuit of "things of the soul" has imprinted on time. The enigmatic procession of mythic and religious figures includes images such as "the Father" whose blaze of iconic light draws on symbolism from Father Time, the Christian God, the "king of the Underworld" and "Wonder There". Elsewhere allusions are more specific though no less subject to unlikely juxtapositions: mankind's martyrs, a fierce Mahatma, the poor of Africa, Buddha, David and Goliath and Medusa merge in and out of the hazardous progress of Sello's soul quest. These puzzling encounters form an argument for Elizabeth to work on: "no one [has] the power of assertion and dominance to the exclusion of other life" is the tenet which must be reconciled with the notion that

people, in their souls, were forces, energies, stars, planets, universes and all kinds of swirling magic and mystery; that at a time when this was openly perceived, the insight into their own powers had driven them mad, and they had robbed themselves of the natural grandeur of life (35).

The task which Sello assigns to Elizabeth is the novel's guiding principle and the key that transforms the dreamspace from a site of insanity per se into the stage of supra-human communication. To reiterate the problem: Elizabeth must find a way to wrest every vestige of hierarchy from the definition of spiritual power and then redefine and relocate the numinous in ordinary people's souls. The ongoing debate, triggered by this task, can be seen as a bridging mechanism from the

dream to the text or the transition from madness to a sanctified sanity. However, the search for abuse-free powers initially leads the questers deeper into perilous territory.

Sello undergoes a transition from a person of beneficence to the status of an absolute "God" who is flawed with egotism and lust. In turn, this transformation produces "Sello of the brown suit" and Medusa who are the final deviant manifestations of the original monk and his virginal wife. Head aligns Sello's fall from grace not with Satan, but with the Osiris myth which encapsulates the fragmentation and reconstruction motifs that pervade the novel.

He had been the Osiris who had been shattered into a thousand fragments by the thunderbolt of Medusa. She [Elizabeth] had been the Isis who had put the pieces together again. The details did not unfold. What unfolded fully was the picture of the reconstructed man, with the still, sad, firewashed face of death. His only comment on the Osiris-Isis tale was: "It was the first work we did together and the first life you lived after your soul had been created" (39-40).

The myth provokes Elizabeth, in her guise as Blabbermouth, to participate in the demystification of the darker mythic elements, like those generated by Pharaohs who revelled in secrecy in order to usurp control of religious life. Blabbermouth's honesty proves insufficient against the self-serving powers that assemble within Medusa and explode through her orgasm to mock Elizabeth for her lack of vagina and African identity. Elizabeth's reconstructive work appears futile against the dream symbols' capacity to disgorge abnormalities and assert fanatical and contradictory laws.

The first nightmarish climax occurs when Sello of the brown suit, disguised as an owl, attacks the foundations of Elizabeth's self-worth. When she discovers a dead owl on the doorstep the next morning, her only means to combat her
collapsing worlds is to abuse the innocent people of Motabeng. After the breakdown and a period when the gardening work overrides the pernicious hold of dream, Medusa and Sello of the brown suit return to hand their mental captive over to Dan’s custody. Exhausted and perplexed by the degradation of Sello’s original soul character, Elizabeth is unable to resist Dan’s seductions. Flattery and showmanship are amongst the coercive means by which Dan exerts mastery over others for he is of those men and gods who are over-endowed with pride. After a short burst of paradisiacal inducements, the dreams of the "Dan" section of the novel change into Dan’s performance with the “nice-time girls” wherein he directs the universe, or so it seems, with his penis. The obscene show, which defiles even the monk Sello with sexual depravity, expands into Elizabeth’s consciousness. However, Dan’s Mephistophelian act has but one goal, Elizabeth’s soul. Despite the torture and near-collapse of her senses, the soul is the one part of her being which she will not surrender. When Elizabeth will not yield, the hells with their Dans, Medusas and brown-suited Sellos dissolve and her twin-soul Sello returns to anoint Elizabeth with the rights to prophecy and healing. Together they have transformed the hierarchy of power into a vision of numinous forces pervading the hearts of ordinary people. Since the downtrodden masses have no hierarchical superiority to wield against others, they are the only human group who can withstand the corruptive tendencies of numinous powers.

When the codes to the meaning of the dreamscape images are broken, the vital significance of Elizabeth’s descent, like Dante’s, into hell is realised. Apart from the parallel progress and subsequent magical fruition of garden, friendship and motherhood in Motabeng’s harsh environment, the everyday reality bears little import to the narrative as a whole. It is the sheer unfamiliarity of method, wherein dream is both textual frame and content, that appears to leave the novel open to deconstructive readings by "analytically" centred minds. In some senses, A Question of Power is openended although not, as Craig MacKenzie claims, because

8 There is no indication that the name “Dan” is modelled on the biblical Dan, one of Jacob’s sons who formed the twelve tribes of Israel but Head’s Dan could be "a serpent in the way / a viper by the path" (Genesis 49.17).
of "the absence of a totalising, meaning-yielding structure [which] allows the reader ... the freedom to interpolate meanings."9 Far from being a deconstructionist's playground, A Question of Power announces its "soul" quest through religious argument and spiritual symbols as the descent progresses through time, culture and gender. On the opening page Head conceals the identity of the man but is emphatic about "his soul [as] a jigsaw", "his soul-evolution" and his capacity to overcome the "pride, arrogance and egotism of the soul" (11). This insistence of purpose plus the circularity, implicit in an opening which is also the conclusion, are means by which Head closes the narrative around "a pursuit after the things of the soul" (11-12). Nevertheless, critics tend to substitute other features for this "soul" as if the term was a transparency to be filled with other images. Depending on the prevailing position, "soul" becomes motherhood, the demolition of patriarchy, the rejection of God, the scar of miscegenation or insanity. Even those, like Rukmini Vanamali, who recognise that "the images that dominate the heroine's psyche are religious by definition," invariably conclude that "the meaning Bessie Head quests for is powerfully non-religious."10 If Vanamali intends "non-religious" to represent "non-denominational" spirituality, then I would agree with her reading for Head is constantly sceptical about over-determined categories. However, not to recognise--and accept--the numinous dimension of Head's writing is, I believe, an error. Paul Lorenz is more astute when he observes that it is only "when the individual recognises the goddess within that the mind becomes decolonized"11--though it is not only colonisation but all forms of power abuse that are dispelled. Head indisputably rejects institutionalised religions but she never doubts the quintessential role that spirituality plays in the human condition nor the inviolable


value of "goodness".

apartheid and insanity

There are three authentic approaches to an analysis of *A Question of Power*: psychoanalytical, re-creational and spiritual. The first explains Elizabeth's experience as a psychosis brought about by the socio-political and personal trauma of identity; the second identifies the text as a creative process whereby Head exorcises the guilt and injury which mar relations between the unknown mother and her daughter and re-creates the relationship anew in spiritual terms; and the third views the text as a soul quest for the answer to the riddle of good and evil which, I propose, can be understood in terms of a shaman initiation ritual. All three approaches are interdependent and all three work to transform Head's problematic identity into that of a visionary and a healer who creates long sought-after "new worlds" (100).

Because Western readers may not readily relinquish a direct psychological approach to Elizabeth's sometimes confessed "stark raving mad" mind, it is imperative that the spiritual nature of dream states as seen through African and Indian eyes be taken into consideration. Nonetheless, the mental aberrations found in the novel do contribute to an understanding of the breadth and complexity of Head's vision. When Head, still a young girl, discovered her mother's identity and fate, the spectre of insanity materialised from the closet of the past to haunt her mind with a suggestion of original sin. She was both violator and victim since Head's conception symbolically murdered her mother and, at the same time, destined the child to alienation from family and society. Head's situation, however, was not without concomitant forces of repeal. The same fusion of black and white which produced social alienation proved to be the symbolic material of Head's moral and spiritual transcendence. Political and social injustice can destroy minds but, analogous to Dan's attempt to violate Elizabeth's soul, the material powers are no match for a rebellious or tenacious human spirit. Firstly, however, I shall deal with the damaging aspects of Head's inheritance which tend to invite psychoanalytical readings of the text.
The racism which erupts in Elizabeth's hysteria, the sexual depravity which permeates her dream hells and the conviction that power *per se* implies domination of one group or being to the detriment of all others are all factors that arise from Head's particular beginnings. Speaking from within Elizabeth's consciousness, Head discloses her feelings about South Africa early in the novel. Elizabeth reflects that it was "like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you" (19). In the dreamscapes, criticism of the white group is transferred to the black African Dan who enters the action together with a sign "Dictatorship since 1910," the year of the racial immorality act (25). Elizabeth's subsequent question is directed at the two opposing, yet like factions: "What did they gain, the power people, while they lived off other people's souls like vultures?" (19).

As a product of miscegenation, Head inherits the racial war with its full range of disturbing contradictions. Stephen Clingman's analysis shows how the colonial condition licenses foreigners to ownership of alien territories and peoples. Possession of that which is unknown to the self is itself a form of madness which, in order to protect the moral sanity of the masters, is deflected onto the indigenous inhabitants in their home environment. The racism that emerges projects itself sexually and draws direct links "between miscegenation and the labelling of 'madness'." Moreover, in the coalescence of colonialism with patriarchy, white men appropriate the authority to rape black women but when a white woman voluntarily engages in sexual relations with a black man, the warped reasoning shows its other face. In the latter case, European ideals of purity are thought to be tainted and, consequently, both partners are seen to be "insane". On the other hand, the "Coloureds" who are born from either type of liaison are "the objects of a repressed sexual history" and must therefore be prevented from making any


13 Ibid 240.
claims to a normal human status. Thus, in colonial situations, insanity is used as an effective control of society's unpalatable elements and, thereby, relieves the ruling class of racial guilt.

When Head takes on the label of her mother's "insanity," she also inherits colonial constructs of impurity. Consequently, on one level, Elizabeth must confront the realisation that history and its religious movements are besmirched with evil and, on another level, she needs to acknowledge that evil grows from within oneself. As noted earlier, South African racism changes colour in A Question of Power's dreamscapes where Dan and Medusa, the representatives of the black ruling class, are presented as the power brokers who pervert human decency to an intolerable degree. Elizabeth's inversion of racist rhetoric, in moments when her mind is out of kilter, forces her to recognise the evil within. Before her psyche can be cleansed, Elizabeth needs to realise that violations against her Batswanan hosts, in retaliation for the things done to her by fate, will not absolve her of pain. By the same token, her two principal dream tempters encapsulate the horrors that lie in wait for those who express any desire for life in terms of human decency and wonder: Sello's figure of goodness is flawed by self-importance and Dan's beauty leads him, like Faust, to overstep the bounds of morality. At this level of the narrative, Elizabeth is at a moral and emotional dead-end with little hope of escape.

Much of the critical attention devoted to A Question of Power is generated from this sense of hopelessness which stresses the victimisation of the woman and the writer. Elizabeth Evasdaughter sees sexual discrimination as the basis of Elizabeth's schizophrenia, claiming that extreme female repression emerges around the edges of every form of bigotry. Although Evasdaughter's interpretation is shaped by a western feminist ideology, she raises an important issue when she observes that Elizabeth challenges the foundations of sexist rhetoric by aspiring to a religious hierarchy:

We [women] are not permitted to say we are prophets or exalted in any way ... we are not allowed to have mixed
bloods or women among our spiritual leaders. Paradoxically, the madness of this female who "failed" as a wife and teacher, this mulatto who "failed" as a white and as a black, has led her to a way of healing our universal paranoiac tendencies.14

Roger Langen's use of Simone Weil's ideas on affliction is a variation on Evasdaughter's reading. Affliction, in Weil's terms, is an intractable suffering caused by extreme "degradation in the eyes of others."15 The experience leaves an indelible but invisible mark and, consequently, the condition is masked. In this emotional cell of loneliness and alienation, the afflicted waits for relief, usually by directing attention "to some indefinitely spiritual source, which has the power to centre existence, to influence personality, to rescue a life."16 Apart from Langen's implication that the visions are self-projections of the mind, he, like Evasdaughter concedes the significance of spirituality in the analysis of A Question of Power.

Clingman's conclusions make a contribution to the complex textual picture:

[T]he rawness of her exposed inwardness is the internal incarnation of external realities. Insofar as the novel offers a diagnosis for all of this it is that unwarranted assertions of power produce madness; but so too does unwarranted subservience to it, or too much goodness or oversensitivity


16 Ibid.
This is an excellent precis of Elizabeth's argument which, as discussed above, leads her on a search for a means to purge the gods of every trace of their hierarchical stature while maintaining their magical and metaphysical nature intact. The search involves Elizabeth in constant speculation over the meanings conveyed by the dream symbols. For instance, in the early stages of Dan's residency, Elizabeth likens him to a hawk's eye, since he is able to discern a person's most secret traits from a metaphorically elevated distance. Attracted to his personality and attentions in some senses, she nonetheless gives a very sane account of his two defects: an African tendency to value sex over love and a propensity for anti-social behaviour. The latter "seems to have its origins in witchcraft practices" which typically exert "a sustained pressure of mental torture that reduces its victim to a state of permanent terror" (137). Sex and witchcraft are political instruments and must thus be eliminated or, at least, their debilitating aspects must be made redundant in a new vision of humanity. Once again, Head's attitude to these subjects are more ambiguous than they appear here, since "sex" can be a mutually shared love and instances of witchcraft, which are inexplicable except in supernatural terms, play a significant role in the novel's spiritual texture. Textual ambiguities, in fact, provide grounds for seeking other than psychological interpretations of the text.

By the same token, psychological readings do illustrate how the mother's insanity is, to a large degree, determined by, and metaphorically reproduces the political asymmetry of apartheid. Such approaches also accentuate the damage inflicted by Christianity and apartheid's hierarchical values on the communalism inherent in many southern African societies: those hierarchical systems cause humankind to be separated from humankind, and from God. In a debate with Tom on the question of black power, Elizabeth argues vehemently for "mankind in general, and black people fit in there, not as special freaks and oddities outside the scheme of things, with labels like Black Power or any other rubbish of that kind"

17 Clingman, 246.
(133). Replications of the oppressor's faults and presumptions of superiority are not the means to repair injustice. Psychoanalytical approaches shed light on apartheid's manipulation of the label of insanity for its own purposes and lead to an appreciation of Head's deeply felt vision of a blended interconnected world but, ultimately, these readings are diminished by the premise that Elizabeth is the sole analyst of her own mental despair. Perhaps, Head's enigmatic words to Randolph Vigne, written while working on A Question of Power, best explain the mysterious otherness of her ordeal: "It was all an internal torment belonging to me alone. In the confusion I opened up a wide radius of pain for other people." All interpretations have to recognise Head's contradictory axiom: the self is intensely the self and, at once, the cosmos.

re-creation

The vital relationship between Head and her mother that was severed at birth develops over time into a struggle to reconcile the woman who brought black and white together with the woman who foreordained her child to a bed of pain. Reconciliation is achieved when the imaginative reconstruction of the "glamorous and mysterious" woman who martyred herself for a just and non-racial world gains ascendancy over the fallen figure of social censure. In a direct reference to the mother, Head evokes the growth of the mother-daughter bond from confusion to love. When the school principal conveys the startling news to the credulous student,

[Elizabeth] had merely hated the principal with a black, deep bitter rage. But later, when she became aware of subconscious appeals to share love, to share suffering, she wondered if the persecution had been so much the outcome of the principal's twisted version of life as the

silent appeal of her dead mother: "Now you know. Do you think I can bear the stigma of insanity alone? Share it with me" (17).

Although the contact between mother and daughter is, in many ways, fictional and imaginative, it is no less tangible for its metaphysical or psychic medium and decidedly more real to Head than the body of Bessie Emery that bore her. In a letter, Head tells Vigne about the relationship:

There is something in me that is my own way and very precious. My mother made it that way for me. Because of the way she died. There is a terrible depth of loneliness in supposed or even evident insanity. There is more ... **A birth such as I had links me to her in a very deep way and makes her belong to that unending wail of the human heart** ... I still say she belongs to me in a special way and that there is no world as yet for what she has done. She left me to figure it out (my emphasis).19

But what exactly is this bond that they share? What is this love so deeply engraved with pain? And how could Head "figure out" a new world for her mother? I suggest that, at this point, it is worth turning to Rudolf Otto's thoughts on an affinity which he finds between creative artists and prophets:

The prophet corresponds in the religious sphere to the creative artist in that of art: he is the man in whom the Spirit shows itself alike as the power to hear the "voice within" and the power of divination, and in each case

appears as a creative force.20

If the mother is positioned analogous to the creator, the relationship between mother and daughter is commensurate with that between the Creator and "its" creation. Head's mother and the Creator are unknowable and, at the same time, they are manifest as the "voice[s] within" the daughter and the religious specialist respectively. Furthermore, if Head's references to her mother's appeals are set in the context of the education that her mother paid for, and the subsequent joys thereby discovered in reading, then the nexus of artist, prophet, mother, Creator and creativity is complete. In other words, even though Head's mother is unknowable because of social and material circumstances, that very absence of definition makes her susceptible to alternative visions shaped by voices within and without. As Otto's comparison makes clear, imaginative expression and visionary revelations are, to all intents and purposes, indistinguishable when the worlds of art and spirituality meet as they do in Head's life and, most markedly, in A Question of Power. But to arrive at the virtual deification of the mother and the re-creation of herself, Head must override the facts of her existence and find a conceptual framework by which to re-connect her mother and herself, not so much to the world, but to the cosmos. This, I believe, is the role that the Hindu notion of reincarnation plays in Head's life and work.

In "Notes from a Quiet Backwater," Head describes how deeply she has imbibed Indian religio-philosophical ideas:

The canvas on which I have worked was influenced by a belief in the Hindu view of rebirth and reincarnation. Such a belief influences one to the view that each individual, no matter what their present origin or background may be, is really the total embodiment of human history, with a vast accumulation of knowledge and experience stored in the subconscious

mind.\(^{21}\)

Reincarnation, as Head understands it, situates her mother and herself in a continuum with all other souls. Consequently, through her faith in this spiritual continuity and her *re*-creation of her own sense of identity through the writing of the text, Head is able to heal the maternal severance caused by her traumatic conception. In *A Question of Power*’s dreamspaces, Elizabeth actually meets her previous incarnations and that process resembles O’Flaherty’s description of the “dreamer dreamt.” “Finding (dreaming what is already there) and making (dreaming something into existence)”\(^{22}\) give Head—in tandem with her protagonist—the capacity and authority to *re*-create the present birth. She grapples with this problem in another communication to Vigne:

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Actually I don’t think I’ve told you but quite a lot of my previous incarnations were spent in India. When I found this out some time ago I thought deeply about the matter. Actually I’m not the kind of person that’s just born for being born sake. It’s very significant that I’ve been born in South Africa. All these years I’ve been trying to find out the purpose in it and true enough there’s smoke all around but bless me if I can find the fire ... I’ve suddenly the conviction that something like the equivalent of God is around in South Africa. It’s one thing to have the strangest revelations all of a sudden thrust upon one’s conscious mind and it’s another not to be able to confirm this in reality ... Figure it out—I might have really gone round the bend. I mean people who get visions and see a gigantic light
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descend on them from the sky can't be all there but if so I feel mighty happy. If one is happy and cracked it's much better than being unhappy and sane.23

The reincarnation, God, visions and the spectre of insanity mentioned here are all directly pertinent to an analysis of A Question of Power, a novel that reaches its fullest expression in Head's re-birthing of her mother and herself.

Commentators recognise that Head's three novels--When Rain Clouds Gather, Maru and A Question of Power--repeatedly journey into the personal recesses of mind and soul. While I totally agree with Ravenscroft's assessment that "each novel both strikes out anew, and also re-shoulders the same burden," I wish to argue that in re-working her most personal concerns in the dreamscapes of this novel, Head literally creates herself and her heritage. The process moves from socio-political repression through the dangerous psychic and cosmic healing of dreams to a regeneration of personality. However, when I claim that Bessie Head is the author of the inner hells and transcendence that constitute her life, I am not suggesting that she invented the tortuous story but that she re-constructed her identity in textual form out of the "shattered little bits" given to her by the circumstance of birth and subsequent life experience. In reading Head this way, I accept MacKenzie's conclusion that her accounts of her own life are often contradictory and unreliable and that "the chief source of biographical data--her first three novels--present her life filtered through her rich but necessarily inventive literary imagination."25 However, rather than attribute the inconsistencies to Head's confessed "unpredictability," I would suggest that attention be paid to the odds stacked against her. The efforts that she made to surmount life's obstacles were,

23 Head, A Gesture of Belonging, 31-2.
24 Ravenscroft, "The Novels of Bessie Head," 175.
and continue to be through her writing of herself, monumental. Given these conditions, it is not surprising that Head's grasp of truth is not always consistent when measured against logical standards.

The mother's pivotal influence in Head's formation of reality can be examined through the numinous mother figures who appear and interrelate with artists in Head's three novels. The process is no less than the absent woman's gradual deification. Mma-Millipede, the spiritual centre of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, nurtures the protagonist Makhaya's scarred psyche, matchmakes him with Pauline and brings God down to the Botswanan soil. It is Mma-Millipede who introduces a "no shoes" God to the village, a God who is much more in tune with the harsh conditions of their lives than his Solomonic predecessor. Yet neither the old lady nor her humble God can prevent the toll which the pitiless environment exacts on the artist. Pauline's young son dies in the unrelenting drought conditions at the cattle-post, although his creative spirit remains in the small carvings that he left behind. Art, like faith, possesses the means to communicate beyond suffering and death. In *Man*, the mother, the artist, the diviner and the cosmos cohere in a tighter symbolic scheme around the central theme of ethnic alienation. Resonances of Head's mother's plight are found when Margaret Cadmore's mother dies in childbirth by the roadside, left untouched because she is a Masarwa, one of a reputedly inferior tribe who are treated as slaves by the local Batswana. An English missionary with a flair for sketching takes over guardianship of the child, not from compassion, but because she is a "do-it-yourself" theorist, advocating nurture before nature. Ironically, after capturing the dead woman in a portrait, the missionary comes to the conclusion that the woman possesses a goddess-like quality which death had not vanquished. The daughter, whom this white woman raises on commonsense logic and social principles of anti-discrimination, herself emerges in adult life as a goddess figure and an artist whose paintings manifest spiritual and divinatory depths. Although manipulated by the leaders of Dilepe, Margaret proves, nevertheless, to be instrumental in opening "the small, dark airless
room in which [the Masarwa] souls had been shut for a long time." Once again, the artist is the catalyst through whom the mother's mystical force operates on worldly injustice. It is instructive to consider that, in the germinating stages of *Maru*, Head wrote to Vigne: "I cannot help but agree with you that my mother in particular, in her soul, was a goddess." *Maru* shows Head's fiction in transition from notions of cosmic order, wherein the artist and her god-like partner adopt the burden of social and moral change, to the reincarnational patterns that emerge in *A Question of Power*.

In the third novel, the daughter is artist and prophet, a blend of black and white and the prototype "ordinary" person who is the genesis of the future. The antitheses, which converge at the novel's end, begin with two foci: Sello's residency in her dreams and the work in the garden. The former subjects the soul to the warring elements of an individual psyche that craves to be healed, while the latter represents a creative rapprochement between a human life and mother earth. Symbolism mirrors life and life mirrors the symbols of mother and daughter cast out but re-entering paradise. Of relevance here is the fact that Head replaces her real-life absorption in writing with Elizabeth's creative engagement in the garden work for the novel is, as Virginia Ola observes, "about growth of food and growth of human life." At the time of the novel's creation, the cooperative gardening group was an actual component of Serowe's Swaneng project, though Head's involvement seems to have been limited to her acquaintance with the instigator of the project, Patrick van Rensburg (Eugene in the novel). Head was indebted to the man's generosity and she admired the way in which his vision melded knowledge brought by overseas volunteers with the skills and needs of the local


population. In her fiction, the communal nature of the gardening group and the creative resources of the earth enable Head to develop a narrative which is, at once, parallel to and contrastive with the private quest experienced in the cosmic expanses of dream. It must be understood, however, that in postulating the earth world as a reflection of the cosmological interior, Head, consistent with the Tswana world-view, makes no clear distinctions between quintessential nature and the numinous.

The dawn came. The soft shifts and changes of light stirred with a slow wonder over the vast expanse of the African sky. A small bird in a tree outside awoke and trilled loudly. The soft, cool air, so fresh and full of the perfume of the bush, swirled around her face and form as she stood watching the sun thrust one powerful, majestic, golden arm above the horizon.

"Oh God," she said, softly. "May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds" (100).

The secure wonder and awe found in nature must, in the Head scheme of things, be replicated in the heart.

As Margaret Tucker points out, the novel progresses through a sequential shift from gardening to the written word. Elizabeth records horticultural ideas and practices in the garden note-book, which are sometimes struck out by the interfering and racist Camilla and, at other times, given over to Kenosi's care. While Elizabeth is incapacitated, Kenosi maintains the records "in a shaky, painstaking handwriting" in a language that is "a fantastic combination of English and Setswana" (203). This blending of languages is indicative of the numerous ways in which Head unites differences. Shorty, symbolically the family's third generation,

represents another element of creativity that works against the evils which threaten his mother's life. Although the narrative devoted to Shorty is not extensive, his appearances demonstrate the revitalising pull that he exerts on Elizabeth's life. Moreover, the relationship between mother and son is analogous to the growing intimacy between the unknown mother and her daughter. Although I differ on this point from Jane Bryce-Okunlola who reads "Elizabeth's lack of a mother (mother-figure, mother-country, mother-tongue) [as] a major factor in her unsettled sense of identity", I agree that Elizabeth's "own mother-role [is] the route to her regeneration."31 However, motherhood's regenerative powers only facilitate Elizabeth's psychic healing when fused with the garden's creativity and the psychic forces of her dreams. The transition from garden to the creative word is accomplished in Shorty's poem which in turn coincides with the convergence of the dream and the natural worlds. Acting as the novel's catalyst, the poem also pre-empts the final creative act—A Question of Power itself—in which Elizabeth resolves the conceptual imbalance of power by investing the powerless with numinous potential. The boy's poem is a mirror-image of the new worlds his mother gathers out of dream: in one, humans fly with gods and birds; in the other, the god-like resides in the ordinary human heart. When dream and garden, mother and son, poetry and vision merge, the essence of the unknown mother is written into Head's life.

As Elizabeth's past and present emerge in the text as a contiguous whole, Head metaphorically realises the prophecy announced in one of the dreamscape's most startling images. In this incident, a compassionate madonna figure steps out of the terrible Medusa and enters Elizabeth in a symbolic penetration suggestive of an inverted birth act. To an anonymous accusation of murder, Elizabeth replies: "I killed, yes, but from that day she became a follower of the Lord" (33). From Head's point of view, the child, in part, caused the mother's suicide, so by accepting the

mother, as it were, back into the womb, Head is able to re-birth her mother by investing her with a textual and spiritual identity. Along with Elizabeth's identity as a visionary and Head's as a writer, Elizabeth's "gesture of belonging" brings the mother, daughter and grandson down with God to rest on the African earth.

In another context, Head's motherless condition correlates with the pervasive cultural dislocation which occurred in Africa during decades of colonial occupation. Here Head criticises the way in which the colonial powers dislocated Africans from their historical roots:

A sense of history was totally absent in me and it was as if, far back in history, thieves had stolen the land and were so anxious to cover up all traces of the theft that correspondingly, all traces of the true history have been obliterated. We, as black people, could make no appraisal of our own worth; we did not know who or what we were, apart from objects of abuse and exploitation. 32

A community robbed of its history is analogous to an orphaned child who has no experience and therefore no sense of familial identity. With this in mind, Elizabeth's hard-won victory in A Question of Power acts as a model for emerging African states. If one orphaned individual who is a committed student of human progress and is still in touch with the cosmic forces of the continent can will herself an identity, a past and a future, then hope resides equally in the moral fibres of future communities. They too may heal old wounds and foster new-found social well-being. Some critics will continue to censure Head for political ineptitude, others will respond by insisting on the political nature of all human acts or with the validity of idealism despite its practical impossibility, but my point--which is in no way original in post-colonial literature--is that Head's novels advocate and demonstrate the need for all people, especially Africans, to gather the shattered little bits of their lives.

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together in order to re-create worlds anew. What is distinctive about Head's advocacy, in this respect, and places her in a direct relationship with Narayan and Farah, is her implicit acceptance of the holistic nature of spiritual consciousness. Though her writing is, perhaps, less intellectually informed than that of Narayan and Farah, her approach is peculiarly unequivocal in its directness and passion:

The least I can ever say for myself is that I forcefully created for myself, under extremely hostile conditions, my ideal life. I took an obscure and almost unknown village in the South African bush and made it my own hallowed ground. Here, in the steadiness and peace of my own world, I could dream dreams a little ahead of the somewhat vicious clamour of revolution and the horrible stench of evil social systems. My work has always been tentative because it was always completely new: it created new worlds out of nothing.33

Undoubtedly Head feels as if she began in a vacuum but, from an outsider's perspective, I would qualify that statement with a paradox that issues from her writing. Head is a single human being who wrote and in so doing created herself, but she is also in the company of a multitude of "guiding spirits" led by her mother. But to explicate the spiritual significance of A Question of Power, we need to return to narrative beginnings and Head's concerns for the well-being of the soul.

healing the healer

"With me," cries Head, "goes a mad, passionate, insane, screaming world of ten thousand devils and the man or God who lifts the lid off this suppressed world does so at his peril."34 Written in 1968 in the early days of her mind's crisis, "God and the Underdog" reveals Head fully immersed in religious ideas on a wide-

34 Head, "God and the Underdog." A Woman Alone, 47.
ranging scale. In the essay, she toys with notions of fire-eyed goddesses striking life into conservative masculine realms and forges daring connections between mythical Pharaohs and the oppressed. A Question of Power's soul quest, it seems, had begun to take shape as Head's all-consuming passion. From my earlier discussion of the dream content of the text, I hope it is clear that Head's evocation of the unending struggle between good and evil garners and cross-fertilises ideas from many religious systems. Though these ideas enter the dreams in a chronologically inaccurate order, they systematically contribute to the dream-generated argument by demonstrating the dangers that arise when gods and their respective followers assume delusions of self-importance. Holy personae from Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam and mighty figures from Greek and Egyptian mythologies wrestle with the tempting spirits. For the most part they fail to alleviate the plight of the downtrodden masses and, instead, often become party to the evil forces that reinforce oppression.

Although religious systems are often compromised in their attempts to attain goodness and perfection, each worldview rests on a fundamental assumption that the chosen way is a process of healing or redemption. Isis heals Osiris, Jesus dies on the cross to redeem humankind, Hindu renunciation frees the inner consciousness so that it is able to merge with the Supreme Being, and Buddha, by an enlightened sophistry, solves the problem of mental and physical suffering by erasing the very idea of earthly existence. Despite the highly ethical values espoused by these systems, all are predicated to some extent on hierarchical progressions, whether this be in the constant upward-striving rebirths of reincarnation or in the straight trajectory through death and resurrection to some form of "heaven" which is invariably perceived as a kingdom. The torment that Elizabeth experiences in her dreams is a direct result of the disparity between the powerful and the powerless, between the god and his creatures, because she will neither accept hierarchical propositions nor surrender her soul. Elizabeth must probe deep into her inner hells in order to discover a viable alternative to her dilemma. Once she has shed all trace of unconscious superior and inferior tendencies, the journey affirms the inviolability of her innermost being but, as it
were, she still has to find an outward expression for its realisation.

In a simplified sense, Head's life inverts the evolutionary pattern of religious ideas, recorded by historians like Mircea Eliade: from a Christian frame in childhood, Head turns to reincarnation as a re-creational paradigm and, gradually, through her resettlement in Botswana, absorbs the so-called archaic belief of African or pantheist worldviews. In the latter, she was inspired by the communal nature of spirituality, discovered in reading John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*. Mbiti's observation that an African's "whole world ... is his religion and he is a religious man," 35 presented Head with an all-time God: "Someone who can be absorbed and accommodated into a whole social structure and can be greeted at any moment." 36 Head reflects that "if God is a subconscious process in our minds, he is perhaps that much more dignified and respected" and, further, that an individual "derives all his spiritual needs from participating in the entire life of the community." 37 In contrast to exclusionist Asian systems that stress individual greatness, this "behind the scenes" African God abides in "just anybody's heaven, where people can feel that he matters infinitely and is loved, infinitely." 38 Such words are the very backbone of *A Question of Power*.

Another characteristic of the system described by Mbiti is its understanding of time as eternal and earth-centred. In other words, people experience death from their human life but they do not "pass away" or "pass on" in any vertical sense. Except for the distinction that they act from another order of experience, the "living dead" continue to be of earth, investing themselves in family and societal affairs. Since each person, being, spirit or force is quintessentially numinous, each is presupposed equal and eternal. Mbiti's personable and ordinary African God complements the more mystical schema found in Gabriel M. Setiloane's study, *The Image of God Among the Sotho-Tswana*. The Sotho-Tswana are the indigenous


36 Ibid.

37 Ibid 52.

38 Ibid 53.
people of a wide area of Southern Africa which includes Serowe and, although Head seems not to have read the material, her ideas coincide sufficiently with those of the book to surmise that she had gained, less systematically, similar impressions from matching Mbitt’s work with the cosmological ideas of the indigenous community around her. Setiloane’s monograph reinforces the communal ethos expressed by Mbitt and, most significantly, reveals a possible meaning for the name Sello. Although warning that people in their day by day activities have no need to make precise conceptual definitions, Setiloane explains that the term modimo, which the missionaries have mistakenly translated as a localised personal god, is more properly expressed as the source or Being of Otto’s "mysterium tremendum et fascinans." Under certain conditions, modimo manifests its unknowable self as a dangerous and sacred "seld" or a “thing." The simultaneous sense of danger and sanctity aroused by "seld" resembles the twofold impression of dread and wonder posited in Otto’s hypothesis on the human response to the numinous which means that "seld" is theoretically a neutral entity. The same could be said of the fictional Sello and his--or its--subsequent incarnations in A Question of Power, since Elizabeth’s mind absorbs the "wholly other" principally through the conflict enacted by her dream companions. Thus, we have a distinction which suggests that Sello is of the numinous but is not it-self the numinous which, I suggest, is just the sort of ambiguity that Head either desired to convey or was unable to eradicate from her interpretation of the dream. What she records is her protagonist’s two-fold response to the numinous, namely the symbolic mediation of the forces of dream into the figures of Sello and Dan who, despite their many internal contradictions, represent goodness and evil respectively. Additionally, the Sotho-Tswana believe that, in order to uphold cosmic harmony, only religious specialists have the right

39 I have changed Setiloane’s use of uppercase script when referring to MODIMO to retain consistency with other foreign language terms used in my discussions.


41 Ibid 84.
to communicate with the Creator through "sela." The ordinary person conducts his or her affairs through less dangerous divine manifestations, such as animal spirits and ancestors. Against this framework, Elizabeth is an embryonic religious specialist.

Head's description of the germination of Elizabeth's dreams suggests that Sello "enters" her life. If Sello is understood to be an external force operating on Elizabeth's soul, it is equally valid to say that she has been elected to endure a life-threatening relationship with the most potent of supra-human manifestations. In other words, Elizabeth is subject to what amounts to a shaman initiation. Before looking into this possibility in more detail, I would like to reiterate that both of the religious systems which attract Head—reincarnation and African communalism—contain moral flaws. Reincarnation is born of, and in part reflects, the reified "caste" structure of Hindu society, while the menace of witchcraft proves to be "the only savagely cruel side to an otherwise beautiful society" (21). Through Elizabeth, Head makes it clear that she regards witchcraft practices as residual "terror tactics people used against each other" in traditional societies in order to maintain their position of unratified authority (21). Such an attitude resonates in her rational explanation of Sello as "the master of psychology behind witchcraft" (21). On the other hand, Elizabeth's trial with the forces of evil suggests that Head believes that the soul's descent into hell is a genuine rite of purification. Furthermore, witchcraft powers—if that is what they are—are made tangible through the few pieces of physical evidence that literally appear to fall out of the dreamspace. The dead owl on the doorstep, the trampled ashes on the floor, the murdered boy in the bush and Shorty's illness are more than coincidences. The material evidence licenses the dreams with a dreadful authority which Elizabeth would prefer to ignore.

The physical aspects of Elizabeth's mental torture provide further evidence that there is more to the phenomenon of witchcraft than political manoeuvres. At times, she feels as if her head "explodes into a thousand fragments of fiery darkness" (141) and elsewhere Medusa puts her in the torture chamber where Dan grooves a track into her mind by repeating the phrase, "Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death" (30). Dark mysteries lurking between Medusa and Sello of the
brown suit, strike Elizabeth with a thunderbolt:

She could feel wave after wave of its power spread over her body and pass out through her feet. As the last wave died down, she simply shot up into the air. There was a quick movement from the indistinct form who forever sat in the chair beside her bed. He caught hold of her in midair and began stuffing her back into something that felt like a heavy dead sack (39).

So, while the rational Head treats Elizabeth's illness as a mental derangement on which histories and quests are projected, her dream-selves insist that God can be Satan and witchcraft can heal. This is exemplified by Dan, who is less complex than Sello as a dream-self, but no less entangled in the webs of paradox. Elizabeth needs the depth of his evil because he "was one of the greatest teachers she'd worked with, but he taught by default--he taught iron and steel control through sheer, wild, abandoned debauchery; he taught the extremes of love through the extremes of hate" (202). Ultimately, Elizabeth's attitudinal contradiction, like Heads, cannot be resolved. All that can be said is that Head retains a respect for witchcraft's inexplicability for she knows that the dark monstrosities are in us, as are the gods. The text, in other words, is a complex expression of Otto's proposed duality of love and dread as is manifest in Elizabeth's response to a numinous presence.

The disparity which occurs between Head's ethical interpretation of witchcraft and the psychic significance that "witchcraft" assumes in her text is paralleled, time and again, in anthropological analyses of the practice. Setiloane claims that, as with the baloi of the Sotho-Tswana, good and bad witchcraft practitioners are invariably confused. For example, although the ngaka women diagnose sorcery or evil spirits by a "process [that] is often ... violent, involving
running away and living in the veld as if insane,"\textsuperscript{42} they are, despite their erratic behaviour, the healers or good witches of their communities. Head appears to be caught up in a similar sort of misinterpretation which is understandable, considering the complexity of issues involved in the concepts of goodness and evil. The most crucial point to emerge from Setiloane's discussion is the fact that Elizabeth's experience is closely related to his description of the ngaka who are of that order of phenomena which can be grouped together under a generalised category of shamans as discussed in "Dream Environments and Shamans." Furthermore, whichever way \textit{A Question of Power} is approached, whether psychologically, re-creationally or spiritually, the text describes, or is itself, a healing process.

I propose that there are three major factors which suggest that shamanism is relevant to Head's text: apparent neurosis, election and the utilisation of both good and evil forces for healing purposes. In qualifying neurosis with "apparent," I am not denying that the behaviour seen by others and experienced by Elizabeth is not physical and tangible, but I do wish to suggest that such behaviour is more than a psychological condition. Near the time of her second breakdown, Elizabeth tells Tom about her inability to differentiate good from evil and God from Satan. Tom admits that such a "terrible idea" is possible and senses "the inward, reeling confusion in her" (161). In response, Elizabeth maintains her silence but

her shattered mind was screaming aloud in agony: "Sello is prancing around in my nightmare with his face full of swollen green blotches. There's a little girl with her face upturned in death. And last night Madame Make-Love-On-The-Floor just raised her legs high in the air. There's no escape for me. There's nothing I can do to stop it. I'm going insane" (161).

\textsuperscript{42} Setiloane, 47.
I propose that Head uses the denotative "insane" because that is the only term available (and familiar) in her vocabulary to describe the complex experience which, otherwise, only the complete novel encapsulates. However, a careful look at the difference between Head's denomination of the event and her metaphorical evocation of it reveals an inconsistency which "madness" in a western sense cannot contain. "The day she broke down she simply howled, and like a volcano the evil erupted in a wild flow of molten lava" (171). Head's usage of the term "evil" demonstrates how her consciousness continually reverts to matters of the soul.

In fact, Head's language raises an interesting issue in relation to contemporary discussions about shamanic experiences. Jeanne Achterberg claims that shamanism is a comprehensive health system in which spiritual development is the prime objective. Health is culturally understood as "an intuitive perception of the universe and all its inhabitants as being of the one fabric ... It is blending and melding, seeking solitude and seeking companionship to understand one's many selves." In order to effect the desired healing, shamans make use of symbols which are his or her way of "distilling the journey [across altered states of consciousness] and presenting information in a way that generates the community's response and understanding. They are not lies, but rather a system used to communicate a little-understood reality." Visions must be rendered into culturally utilisable forms, a process which Mary Schmidt describes as manipulating an "inchoate, undifferentiated cosmos" into the metaphors of the "people's familiar heavens." The cultural disjunctions of Head's life preclude her identification with any tightly-knit symbolic system of spiritual health but, in personal terms, the figures (or spirits) that populate her dreams do reflect Head's wide-ranging


44 Ibid 109.

knowledge of spiritual systems. Hence, in Achterberg and Schmidt's terms, Sello, Dan, Medusa and so forth are symbolic representations of Elizabeth's encounters with the inchoate forces of the cosmos and "evil" is part of an appropriate symbolic vocabulary which conveys the spiritual rather than the psychotic nature of her dreams.

Moreover, Elizabeth's experience replicates the characteristics of shamans who are said to be

separated from the rest of society by the intensity of their religious experience, and in this sense they resemble the mystics of historic religions ... [Shamans] must display a certain excitability of temperament, which in modern Western society might be considered as bordering on a psychopathic condition.46

This appearance of erratic behaviour or of a severe illness is most pronounced at times of shamanic election during which the cosmic forces are said to test a subject's suitability as a healing specialist. When Eliade states that shaman initiation follows the pattern of "suffering, death, resurrection"47 and Kilborne observes that "the body is mortified so that the soul, or life principle, can enter into contact with divine beings,"48 the ideas that inform shamanism are as close to universal principles as may be possible. What is important to realise is that such ideas do not exist without the individual or the community's presupposition that humankind is formed by a creator force which permeates earthly "being" with purpose. That


A Woven Cloth of Shattered Little Bits

notion has to be firmly absorbed before any suffering or mortification of the soul can occur. Goodness and a hunger for things of the soul are intrinsic to Elizabeth's ontological perception and the value of those qualities are reinforced during her initial meetings with Sello the monk. Suffering only begins when the participants of the dreamspace attack the moral grounding of Sello's and Elizabeth's faith. The point is critical in reading Head and equally difficult to confirm, yet Head's faith in the numinous nature of life is a given. This faith can be described as self-projection, the result of a sensitised imagination or the sheer will to identity, but ultimately one must accept that the supra-human forces exist in Head's concept of reality, that they are beyond the "ego" even as they are its most elemental innerness.

The second stage of initiation, according to Eliade, is a figurative death such as Elizabeth records when, at the bottom limits of her struggle, she feels as if Dan is "hacking her to death between blackouts" (180). Resurrection occurs, archetypically, through love. The epiphanic moment takes place when Tom visits Elizabeth after her release from the psychiatric ward. The monk Sello is there, too, and he activates love's force-field when he comments, "I love him," meaning Tom. On his part, Tom remains puzzled before the dimension of Elizabeth's love, recalling their first meeting in the garden when Elizabeth showed concern for the emotional welfare of the vegetables: "Isn't that love, not only for people but for vegetables too?" (188). "Her soul-death was really over in that instant, though she did not realise it. He seemed to have, in an intangible way, seen her sitting inside that coffin, reached down and pulled her out. The rest she did herself" (188). No clue is given as to whether it is Sello or Tom who helps her out. The blurred distinctions made between Elizabeth's two friends from different worlds may be another narrative means of infusing ordinary humans with extraordinary potential. The main point at this juncture is that Elizabeth, having survived the "examination of inner hells [that] was meant to end all hells forever" (12), is free to contact Sello, "an almost universally adored God" (23), and secure from him the gift of healing.

Election of initiates by the gods, ancestors and spirits is not the only way of becoming a shaman, but it is particularly pertinent to Elizabeth. I have already discussed Sello's entrance to the chair beside her bed as a transformation of a
candle’s symbolic light into human form. Sello’s dignified entrance contrasts with Dan’s staged introduction.

He came along from out of nowhere. He came along from outer space. He came along in clouds of swirling, revolving magic, with such a high romantic glow that the whole of earth and heaven were stunned into silence before the roar of his approach (103).

Despite the different strategies of their personalities, they both choose Elizabeth for the innate qualities of her soul. At the same time, although the two figures are explicit and separate throughout the major part of the narrative, they seem, as previously discussed, to be manifestations of Otto’s single awesome force apprehended as love and dread, or as good and evil. Eliade describes the elect as "those who experience the sacred with greater intensity than the rest of the community—those who, as it were, incarnate the sacred, because they live it abundantly, or rather "are lived" by the religious "form" that has chosen them.”49

The incarnated sacred invariably subjects the body ego to dreams of overwhelming power and

in a great many instances the shaman who has had such an initiation dream does not decide to become a shaman, even though he knows his dream beckons him in that direction; he refuses, out of fear, and goes on about his own way, until he falls mortally ill. At that point there is what might resemble a pact with the terrifying forces: the individual promises to become a shaman in return for restored health.50

49 Eliade, Shamanism, 32.

50 Kilborne 489.
In Elizabeth's final conversation with Sello such an uneasy pact is reached. Apologising for the appalling agonies that his weakness and Dan's satanic power have wreaked on Elizabeth, Sello informs her that there had been no other way of deflecting Dan's will to evil:

You were created with ten billion times more power than he ... You will never know your power. I will never let you see it because I know what power does. If the things of the soul are really a question of power, then anyone in possession of power of the spirit could be Lucifer (199).

Ultimately her insight into absolute evil amounts to little other than a determination always to speak the truth, no matter how dreadful that truth may be. She even has qualms about future rebirths in Sello's prophetic lineage because one side of her nature considers that prophets are freaks and something apart from ordinary people. Yet, reservations aside, Elizabeth is fully healed when, in spite of all the inordinate demands of the dreamspace, she emerges with Sello sharing "a feeling of being kissed by everything; by the air, the soft flow of life, people's smiles and friendships" that expressed an equal love between all things (202).

A Question of Power is an account of a life's recovery from turmoil. If the life in question is taken to be that of an individual grappling with a diseased mind, then the novel is the graphic record of a neurosis fermented in the circumstances of Elizabeth's (and thus Head's) tragic birth. But if the focus of interpretation centres on the artist and her need to articulate identity, then that life becomes one of unusual creation in which a catharsis of self-identity is synonymous with the act of writing. The novel, in this respect, is evidence of fiction transformed into truth or, in other words, of the creator's self-creation. However, A Question of Power is more than one woman's struggle against insanity and personal deprivation, for the narrative is, first and foremost, the story of her quest for the soul. Read in this way,
the novel's fragmentation and reintegration are part of a life into which is woven the presence of many lives. These are drawn from personal, historical and mythic sources in order that the human spirit's search follows its timeless course. This quest is also an encounter with the numinous in which an archetypal battle between goodness and evil is re-played. Since Elizabeth's battle occurs in dreams under the guidance of Sello, a variation on the Sotho-Tswana name for an unknowable godhead's most dangerous manifestation, I have argued that *A Question of Power* is ultimately a description of the archaic shamanist practice of initiation. This interpretation stresses the healing of Elizabeth's troubled mind as a narrative process; the powers which she achieves on behalf of the poor of Africa at the novel's end; and the healing potential of Head's fiction itself.

Reborn through the resurrectional force of love, Elizabeth finds ordinary human harmony beside her son, Kenosi and Tom, while Head writes on like a textual shaman for the people of Serowe. The three innovative social fictions which follow *A Question of Power* capture the dignity and creative possibilities of the villagers who have been born to the land on the desert's edge. These people create struggling new worlds from the hardships on which they are nourished. Moreover, *The Collector of Treasures*, *Serowe*, *The Village of the Rain Wind* and *Bewitched Crossroads* testify that the "gesture of belonging" which Elizabeth makes to the land is not just a fictional device but a true expression of arrival from the no-man's-land of her birth. Furthermore, with the restoration of her own health, Head is able to re-create the bonds between mother, daughter and grandson within a wider vision of a cohesive material and spiritual world. It may be that, in the fullness of time, the trust which Head implants in Elizabeth of Motabeng and the people of Serowe will extend to the new worlds of South Africa. If one daughter can heal the scars of birth then hope remains for the people of South Africa in their present task of the rehabilitation of the society after apartheid. Bessie Head is a unique gift from a mother to Africa, but she is only one of the many sons and daughters who dream to "shape the future" of their motherland. Restoration of the prevailing goddess, Africa, is a question of *re*-creation of power wherein the shattered little bits of pain are woven again into the cloth of a supra-human heritage.
"ALL THINGS ARE LINKED":
BEN OKRI'S THE FAMISHED ROAD
AND SONGS OF ENCHANTMENT
 Dreams, dreaming and dreamers are fundamental to the numinous nature of Ben Okri's The Famished Road and Songs of Enchantment. However, instead of the trials that dreams imposed upon Elizabeth in A Question of Power, here, dreams multiply and converge around a single and self-consciously unattainable goal which is nothing short of a description of infinity. This endeavour impacts on the range, content and structure of Okri's storytelling and makes the two sizeable volumes one unfinished and, indeed, unfinishable tale. Mum's interjection in dad's telling of the antelope-woman's story and his quip in reply neatly encapsulates this idea: "'Your story isn't going anywhere,' mum said, in the dark. 'A story is not a car,' dad replied. 'It is a road, and before that it was a river, a river that never ends'."1 Despite narrative mass, the plot is but a short span in the life of Mum, Dad and Azaro who struggle to survive in a Nigerian ghetto under the weight of political and supra-human oppression. Yet, the brief linear duration contains labyrinthine loops of action which, paradoxically, imbue the writing with a keen sense of purpose. This tale of the single and the multiple is simply a different form of storytelling. The novels evoke contemporary experience drawn through the kaleidoscope of traditional thought to create an innovative discourse or, as Okri himself explains it, "an unfixed book, a river" that is "against the perception of the world as being

1 Ben Okri, Songs of Enchantment, London, A Vintage Book (1992 ed): 266. All future references to the novel will appear in parentheses with (SOE) and page number. I follow Okri's usage of the lower case for mum and dad in Songs of Enchantment. This change in the second book will be addressed later in the discussion.
coherent."\(^2\) Further, when Okri states that in "many ways I'm just an old-fashioned singer of songs,"\(^3\) he completes the metaphorical grid of water, storytelling and music which correlates with a West African notion that "the river is a bard, endlessly transmitting the old stories ... [since] water contains and conducts utterance."\(^4\) The circulating rhythms of the bard's songs reflect patterns found within and made by water that, it is said, replicate the designs of creation. The dynamic integration of the natural environment, the cosmic forces and art expressed in this analogy is, I will argue, characteristic of Okri's style and purpose. What literally fills the two volumes is an investigation into alternative modes of perception or, phrased differently, the narratives probe into the viability of seeing in every direction from within a dynamic non-linear time. Okri's perceptual lenses are so scattered and varied that the turmoil which shakes Elizabeth's mind seems centred and strangely uni-directional in comparison. Surprisingly, Okri's method skirts confusion and, instead, creates multifarious visions from many realms and a sense of wonder that matches any road's famishment.

Perhaps the best account of the genesis of The Famished Road and Songs of Enchantment is found in Okri's novel of 1981, The Landscapes Within. Starting out in the mould of James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, the novel follows the painter Omovo's soul-searching around the streets of Lagos. He wades through filth, corruption, failure and violence till he encounters the equivalent of Joyce's epiphany brought to a fresh vibrancy by Okri's use of concepts from Nigerian cosmologies. Omovo calls this phenomenal vision "everywhereness" which represents a form of perception that is distinctively more conscious of movement and multiplicity than its counterpart, the essences of

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Joyce's "whatness":

Every moment fissioned into its endless possibilities of life. A million suspended fragments revolving on the crack of every crest. Deep shivers of love. **The seized sense of an unfinishable and terrifying portrait of humanity**

... The ugly webs of manipulated history, before and after; clarity and chaos; points of ever-moving motionless life ... A dim, incomplete, painful beatific vision. Everything. (my emphasis)\(^5\)

Ten years later, Okri delves deeper into indigenous concepts and symbolism and Omovo's project of "an unfinishable and terrifying portrait of humanity" becomes *The Famished Road*. Joyce has vanished and a daring Nigerian writer has taken his place. The narrative transformation which facilitates this contemporary West African vision of "everywhereness" is the new protagonist and narrator of psychic and supra-human realms, Azaro, a Yoruba spirit-child or *abiku*. It is unclear why Okri chooses the Yoruba term *abiku* and many features of this culture's epistemology for his story since he himself was born of an Igbo mother and an Urhobo father.\(^6\) I would suggest that the decision was influenced by the familiarity of Yoruba ethnicity to a wide literary public through the work and reputation of Wole Soyinka. Furthermore, Okri's writing is closer in spirit to that of Soyinka than to the other mentor of Nigerian literature Chinua Achebe (himself an Igbo), which may indicate an intertextual dialogue with the mythopoetic elements in such Soyinkan plays as *The Road* and *A Dance of the Forests*. Whatever the underlying reasons may be, Okri's decision to adopt a Yoruba-like persona is not made in order to fix the narrative to a specific culture in time and space. Rather, the

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All Things Are Linked 162

indeterminacy of the adopted abiku persona suggests that Okri includes all people and their cultures in his advocacy of the idea that archaic knowledge be reborn in the present expressly for the benefit of the future.

to make happy a bruised face

By definition, Azaro is a special being, one who spans the invisible and equivocal fine-line abyss between spirit and human identity. As such, Azaro is a privileged narrator who can spy and tumble into the riddles of many realms. At the same time, his abiku privilege is offset by the need to choose continually between life and death which, like most things in this enigmatic text, is not what it seems, because for an abiku death means a re-entry into the eternity of the unborn.7 Given that the unborn is a realm of unending beauty and delight, choice would seem predetermined, yet spirit-children are considered to be drawn to the human experience for its novelty. Some, it is said, agree to be born to inflict suffering on their mothers or to wreak havoc in human affairs while others, like Azaro, decide to "come into the world weighed down with strange gifts of the soul, with enigmas and an inextinguishable sense of exile" because, above all else, they want "to make happy the bruised face[s] of the [women] who would be [their mothers]."8 According to West African moral codes, the value of mothers is inestimable so in addition to what may appear to be a perfectly natural desire, Azaro's avowal is marked with deep cultural significance. I will return to these matters in due course because mothers and the abiku phenomenon in their metaphorical polysemy play key roles in many of the patterns of meaning that are distributed throughout the two books. For the moment, let it be understood that people believe that the objective of a spirit-child "is to torment its parents by dying early in infancy or before it completes the legitimate life cycle ... [only to return] with the same

7 Amos Tutuola calls the spirit children simply the "born and die" children in The Bush of Ghosts, but Soyinka freely uses the term abiku in poems and in Ake.

Thus a "ruthless cycle" of birth and death is established wherein the abiku exhibits its liminal and transitory nature or, in Okri's terms, an abiku is a life in the process of transformation. Note here the conceptual similarity with Farah's "partial narrative." The distinctions between the two visions lie in the frequency and destinations of the transformative activity: Farah posits a single transformation from the secular to the sacred whole through death, whereas Okri proposes an infinite number of transformations that, as it were, loop back to enhance the lives of the living. Further, in Okri's metaphorical language, genuine birth will only occur when the abiku makes a commitment to the living, as Azaro does to his mother.

Azaro's story begins with a riddle: "In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry" (TFR 3). The riddle acts as the metaphorical source of Azaro's far-reaching sight as well as the living terrain explored in the narrative. The metaphorical paradigm of river-road-world is literally the mysterious catchment area of myth, poverty and possibility into which the story and Azaro are born. Having made his choice for life, Azaro farewells his spirit companions and receives a final briefing from the great king, a figurative deity in the narrative, whose many lives and names of genius derives from his "love of transformations and the transformation of love into higher realities" (TFR 3-4). Unlike Head in A Question of Power, Okri signposts his writing clearly, at least, in terms of the type of questions to pursue. To what order of transformations does Azaro refer? Just what is this higher reality? The search for answers continues throughout the two books--and implicitly beyond--for the questions generate a whole range of responses from a simple change of king into cat to the enigma of the human condition's potential supra-human powers. Only in retrospect is the reader, like Azaro's family, aware that they have been journeying with the virtually invisible king on the roads of perpetual transformation.

Unaccustomed to the ghetto's strange smells, colours and hungers, the

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newcomer promptly succumbs to the *abiku* curse and falls into dangerous fevers, the first of the many crises that beset his life. Azaro's early adventures introduce the reader to the many spirits and ghosts that inhabit the ghetto and often frustrate people's efforts to survive the hardships of life on the fringes of urban life. Mum toils through her pitiless hawking rounds, Dad cracks under the weight of his loads of salt and garri and Azaro exacerbates their troubles by slipping into misadventures at every bend in the road. One important, if ephemeral figure from the early section of the narrative is the idol of the white goddess whose mighty pregnancy craves children to fill its empty womb. Aided by the great king in the form of a black cat, Azaro barely escapes entrapment in her spells, only to find himself buffeted from one chaotic world to another. The white goddess joins Azaro's spirit companions and the many other miscellaneous characters who have designs on Azaro's person and they all pre-empt his relationship with the inimitable Madame Koto.

The ghetto begins a new cycle when Madame Koto sets up her place of transaction, a palm-wine bar, at the end of the road. At once benevolent and sinister, Madame Koto is an over-large character who possesses inexplicable powers that propel her into the domain of legend where she "would sprout a thousand hallucinations ... born of stories and rumours which, in time, would become some of the most extravagant realities of our lives" (TFR 37). On the one hand, she plays the role of family benefactor and, on the other, she forms this relationship with the little family because she detects Azaro's *abiku* nature and considers his presence in her bar to be an auspicious sign for her vaulting ambitions. Similarly, Madame Koto's singular generosity towards the ghetto women continues throughout most of the narrative to counterpoint her appetite for power. The conflicting traits of generosity and greed make her an ambiguous character whose most sinister moments are sporadically mellowed by her recognition of an alienation from the community that had initially been the source of her strength. Self-reflection aside, Madame Koto's obesity grows in relation to her developing lust such that, by the end of *Songs of Enchantment*, her rhinoceros-like figure matches her inordinate and unassailable greed. While avoiding direct association with politics' burlesque show of false promises and poisoned powdered milk in the campaign leading up
to the nation's long-awaited independence, Madame Koto, nevertheless, enters into conspiracy with the political materialists of the Party for the Rich who hunger for the spoils of power. Ultimately, in league with both politics and sorcery, the malevolent aspects of her nature consume every trace of its finer qualities, or so it would appear. In contrast, the inhabitants of the ghetto find little difference between the Party for the Rich and the Party for the Poor, since both organisations are equally crude in their manipulation of voters and in their contamination of justice. Both parties do violence to the roads of people's lives and, consequently, they must be exposed and supplanted by viable alternatives. But how do the powerless affect such an unlikely transformation?

**photographic exposures and the mighty spirit**

Efforts to change the debilitating status quo are made by the photographer's social commentary and Dad's ineffectual yet passionate attempts to set himself up as a candidate for the elections. A comparison of these two characters reveals a strategic change in Okri's art from active social condemnation to transformation by psychic means. Perspicaciously, the photographer orchestrates his camera work in such a way that his photographs act as the ghetto's eyes and, hence, as their commentator. With his "lurid photographs of the chaos unleashed when the politicians came around with their rotten milk" (TFR 141), he is the quintessential artist of social dissent, stripping injustice and suffering down to a startling nakedness. Ironically, it is the photographer's very effectiveness and subsequent fame that results in his elimination from the scene by those who fear his power. In the act of protest, the artist exposes himself to imprisonment, death or exile—outcomes, in other words, that ultimately thwart his efforts to effect reform. Intertextually, the photographer is linked with an impressive body of African writer-artists such as Achebe, Soyinka, the early Armah and Ngugi who are Okri's predecessors and mentors. These writers experienced the transition from colonialism to independence first hand and were affected by the crippling bitterness that issued in the wake of euphoric expectations. Injustice and human failure marked the two eras their lives straddled and they felt obligated to expose the
complex historical events with all of their ensuing contradictions. The fact that their work failed to modify the corrupt regimes or pacify warring factions is no reflection on the penetrating literature they created but their lack of success does raise questions about artists' ability to reform society. As such, the issue of artistic agency is particularly pertinent to the members of the next generation who, in Alastair Niven's view, are "more self-obsessed, certainly more jaded in their view of politics." Writing before the publication of The Famished Road, Niven suggests that Okri thus "turns the problems of Africa into self-examination." While this has some value, the ending of The Landscapes Within and short stories such as "Incidents at the Shrine" indicate a shift in direction that is not so much Africa internalised as an acknowledgment that reality is a complex conjunction of psychic insight, multiple external worlds and individuals who are also in some sense communities. Okri, after the masters, begins his writing career in protest against the atrocities of civil war and the squalor of Omovo's "Scumscapes" but with the notion of "everywhereess," the focus of the writing changes. By Songs of Enchantment, the tactical fight against injustice has turned to the psychic networks which link humans to supra-human worlds. Words of protest are transformed into the healing practices of a narrative shaman.

The revised strategy involves an intensified probe into personal and communal suffering in the course of which Okri discovers patterns of paradox and puzzles that, ethically and spiritually, challenge the perfidious grip of politics. Azaro's ability to enter into dreams and other realms makes him an ideal narrator of Dad's transformation into the new shamanic artist. Political thugs ignore Dad's ridiculous interventions into public affairs. They leave him to expound mighty schemes and denounce rampant corruption because, like Farah's unpredictable and prophetic Khaliif, Dad is deemed incompetent and mad. On the other hand,


11 Ibid.
although physical prowess and a love of boxing exclude Dad from his father's profession as the Priest of the Road, at a deeper level the anomalous conjunction of prize fighter and priest enable him to be a zealot of alternative and stranger transformations. Analogically, poverty provokes Dad's temper, causing him to inflict violence on his long-suffering family, and at once fuels his spiritual energies. Unless one follows Okri's edict to peer closely into all things, the disparate elements of boxer, priest and poverty may seem irreconcilable. However, the unlikely combination reveals that, apart from brief encounters with political thugs, Dad's fights are dangerous encounters with figures from the Land of Ghosts and, later, with the other oppressor, vindictive sorcery. The incongruous competitions between opponents from different realms foreshadow the change from the physicality of The Famished Road's boxing bouts to the great tussles with ideas undertaken in Songs of Enchantment. Consequently, despite his ravings against the evils of the system and in spite of his skewed vision of a utopian university for beggars, Dad never really meets politics head-on. His victories and insights are founded in spiritual domains, made available to him through a coalescence of the unlikely aspects of his character and situation. Correspondingly, the narrative moves from the oppression of politics to the pernicious powers of the supra-human, although the parallels made between the two areas of experience remain a significant aspect of textual meaning. The change would seem to remove control further from human agency but, ironically, it is in the inmost strata of an individual that the sense of social responsibility and cosmic identity connect. There, where the self is most private is also that altered state of consciousness in which everybody, oppressors and oppressed alike, is implicated in the social and psychic crisis. In accordance with the narrative shift, Okri changes mum and dad in Songs of Enchantment to the lower case, indicating that individualised characterisation is hitherto subsidiary to their allegorical roles as mother and father, woman and man, of the ghetto.

Thus, the dad of Songs of Enchantment, the dad who has sunk deeper into the punch-drunk mysteries of being, is the shamanic healing artist of the ghetto's ills. In this transformation, dad rescues the ghetto from a partly self-induced
blindness and lethargy by challenging the forces of sorcery that have outstripped the despotic rule of politics. The major players in the sorcery are Madame Koto, the blind old man--who begins in *The Famished Road* to churn out his ugly music around the family's crises and is discovered in *Songs of Enchantment* to be a master sorcerer--and the jackal-headed Masquerade. The Masquerade, erected like a grim parody of a billboard outside Madame Koto's bar, attracts a terrible and powerful deity on the proprietress's behalf--one, moreover, that grows exponentially sinister in relation to her obesity. The madness of dad's challenge to these dark forces evolves into a sequence of lyrical beauty during which dad unblocks the spirit of the community by re-dreaming the cosmos, "naming ... the things of the world as if everything were nothing but a quivering incantation" (SOE 277). He

spoke of the stars and comets as letters of a divine alphabet, letters all scattered and scrambled up in an eternal riddle or enigma--scrambled up so that each man and woman has to re-order the words they perceive and transmute their own chaos, creating light out of the terrible conundrum of their lives" (SOE 278).

In the rearticulation of ancient knowledge, the healing agents of balance and hope are restored to the ghetto. Dad and the community attend to their neglected obligations and bury the dead man whose troubled soul had been the offal sustaining the pervasive malignancy. The sorcery unleashed onto the world by Madame Koto, her jackal-headed masquerade and the blind old man is thus held in check and, although political corruption has not been purged and genuine independence remains in the unrealised future, the deadly alliance between politics and sorcery has been allayed. Roads and gods, mothers and fathers, children and beggars continue to be hungry for transformations but, inspired by dad's psychic understanding, the community's perception is heightened and an untold future begins. Although the following metaphorical map is a gross simplification of the
interaction that occurs between the two books, *The Famished Road*’s artist can be seen as the photographer of social comment whose object is flawed politics, in contrast with the charismatic shaman of *Songs of Enchantment* who employs spiritual courage to curb sorcery’s bid for supremacy. Pragmatically, the two types may be equally ineffectual about matters of governance, except that, similar to Deeriye’s ascendancy to martyrdom, when mysterious forces play their part there will always be a promise of transformation, a promise capable of sustaining the oppressed through their bleakest trials.

**following the shaman**

The cryptic qualities of Azaro’s early experiences enable Okri to establish various criteria for reading the work. Firstly, the genre of the writing is not fantasy, nor magic realism nor even postmodernist in the usual sense of its condition or definition, since the child narrator and his special gifts are culturally encoded. Azaro describes, rather than interprets, the various realities that he encounters, in such a way that creatures with webbed feet or crocodile tails are what they are recognised to be, non-human spirits about the business of transaction at the marketplace. He can be startled by such encounters but he cannot, and does not, question the validity of their reality. Therefore, what Azaro encounters is a realism from a Nigerian point of view in which psychic knowledge and appearances play major roles. Olọrọ’s position is somewhat different from Head’s for, unlike her, he makes no claims to create from lived experience, but rather explores the issues of psychic perception through dreams, trance states and out of the body experiences for the enrichment of the human condition. At the same time, Okri’s scenario is not pure supposition because he works within cultural guidelines of gifted men and women known variously as diviners, *dibias*, medicine specialists and seers or, according to my readings of the phenomena, shamans. As discussed, shamans are specialists who, through dream or trance, contact the spiritual powers for the well-being of their community, especially in terms of people’s troubled or diseased “soul” selves. Furthermore, Mihály Hoppál, in referring to shaman’s etymological roots in the Sanskrit word *saman*, meaning song, concludes that
the shaman is literally the person who sings the song, with long genealogies, to cure, to conjure, to heal. He is not simply an "ascetic," but also a wise man and poet. One of the main roles of oral-traditional poetry in culture is to create a bridge between past and present ... a form of symbolic mediation with the aim of maintaining group identity."12

Since songs and storytelling, genealogical continuity and heightened psychic perception are embedded features of the abiku books, I suggest that Okri's narratives can be said to resemble the shamanic process as described by Hoppál. Moreover, Okri's message of the healing potential that can be gained through heightened perception is, according to the literature, the central tenet of shamanic practice.

From another angle, Okri follows the model of genealogical lineages that are central to Ayi Kwei Armah's two myth-like histories, Two Thousand Seasons and The Healers. Okri's debt to his forerunner is evident in the intertextual resemblance of the concept of ancestral knowledge, which Armah calls "the Way" and which Okri develops into "The African Way." However, whereas Armah is concerned with the concept as a device through which to address the social disease caused by all the forms of colonialism that have afflicted the continent, Okri sees the "African Way" as knowledge which heals. In correlation with the shift from social protest to psychic healing, Okri's "African Way" is a supra-human agency that provides the present generation with the means to remember forgotten wonders and regenerative myths. Needless to say, the remembering process occurs in the heightened consciousness of dreams where Azaro witnesses the traditional knowledge that has been replayed throughout the centuries.

The Way that keeps the mind open to the existences beyond our earthly sphere, that keeps the spirit pure and primed to all the rich possibilities of living, that makes of their minds gateways through which all the thought-forms of primal creation can wander and take root and flower ... The Way that makes them greet phenomena for ever as a brother and a sister in mysterious reality; The Way that develops and keeps its secrets of transformations -- hate into love, beast into man, man into illustrious ancestor, ancestors into god; The Way whose centre grows from divine love, whose roads are always open for messages from all the spheres to keep coming through ... The Way that always, like a river, flows into and flows out of the myriad Ways of the world (SOE 160).

It eventuates that, in some form or another, this dream is communally experienced. Aroused and remembering their obligations, the people ritually cremate the rotting butterflies that had been the external sign of the community's blindness. The ghetto's inhabitants are not yet freed from oppression's clutches but this scene acts as a rehearsal for the greater remembering and action when the dead man is buried and the cosmos is re-dreamt. Both episodes demonstrate that heightened perceptual abilities provide the means for the collective memory to redress present problems.

The shamanic influence on Okri's *abiku* novels works on three narrative levels: the characters of Dad and Madame Koto, narrative meaning and, as the inspiration behind the exploration of perception, Okri himself. I can only suggest that, because of his creations, Okri can be seen as a shamanic writer, but I will address characterisation and meaning in greater detail. Dad's transition from a poverty-stricken load carrier with a penchant for boxing to the man who takes the initiative to "re-dream" the cosmos when the ghetto is struck by crisis has been discussed in relation to Okri's positional move from social protest to psychic
healing. The latter emerges as an alternative approach to the failure of Nigeria's socio-political organisation and utilises traditional wisdom to suggest cures for modern ills. Okri's work would seem in certain respects to answer to Chidi Amuta's "revolutionary" reading of Armah's *The Healers* wherein the commentator proposes that Armah's "selective resurrection of traditional African social systems" promotes a "profound idealism and vague materialism." While Okri does exhibit idealistic or utopian tendencies, he does so from the squalid and oppressed grounds of the ghetto. Moreover, unlike Armah's spiritual healers, Dad's character is far from idealistic. He is an example of an ordinary poor man who is illiterate, short-tempered and slightly mad. The attributes which single Dad out from the rest of the ghetto's inhabitants are his largesse of spirit and his passions for boxing and justice. These qualities lead him on an unwitting journey towards the acquisition of shamanic powers and makes him a fitting Nigerian counterpart to the Hindu Raju. Though Narayan and Okri both appear to revel in the incongruity between their characters' personalities and attained spiritual status, Okri also presents a clear message about the nation's need of dad-like people in the actual world.

As a further corrective against facile idealism, Okri's portrayal of Madame Koto demonstrates the pitfalls that can arise from psychic action when supra-human powers are used for culturally unethical purposes. Madame Koto's dynamic personality looms over the ghetto tale and points to her possible identification with the Yoruba category of "mothers" whose creative forces and fearful aspects are widely respected. It is said

that women, primarily elderly women, possess certain extraordinary power equal to or greater than that of the gods and ancestors, a view that is reflected in praises acknowledging them as "our mothers," "the gods of


14 Ibid 139.
society," and "the owners of the world." With this power, the "mothers" can be either beneficent or destructive. They can bring health, wealth, and fertility to the land and its people, or they can bring disaster--epidemic, drought, pestilence.¹⁵

Thus, "mothers" are an unusual category of being who, like shamans, are able to access supra-human powers, except that "mothers" give no guarantee that their purpose will be curative. Thought to be in touch with liminal spheres, the "mothers" are also known as "bird mothers" or "ones with two bodies" because at night they are said to fly around in synthesised human and bird forms in order to conduct their witchcraft affairs. In dreams, Azaro frequently encounters images of Madame Koto balancing on a pair of bird's legs and, in the latter stages of her degeneration, her night manifestation's impregnation by the Jackal-headed Masquerade and blind old man-come-vulture brings forth three baby Masquerades:

...children who spent their lives divided, warring against each other, fighting for their mother's milk, savaging her breasts, and tearing her apart in a bizarre incestuous and greedy rage--while Madame Koto, the new Mother of Images, heaved gently, asleep, on her mighty bronze bed (SOE 142-3).

The above passage hints at Madame Koto's membership of the ambiguous category of "mothers" and illustrates the fanatical and, hence, destructive extremities to which her ambitions have driven her. At another level of the narrative, the savage births provide a direct analogy with the civil wars which produced the most significant images of Nigeria in the early years of independence. In Okri's development of Madame Koto's imbalanced personality, he shows how

people who lose sight of communal values invariably end up manipulating suprahuman powers for negative purposes. Thus, Madame Koto's shamanic potential is perverted though not irrevocably lost because, in Okri's final reference to the defeated woman, he implants suggestions of another re-birth. Madame Koto is, literally, bound down by dream at the novel's end where "all her enemies were turning into trees and ... the trees were growing on the island of her body, fastening her flesh into the earth with their relentless roots" (SOE 259). Although equivocal, Azaro's observation links the ex-proprietress with the novel's ecological concerns and, on the other hand, he unites the female principle with the regenerative mother earth. The metaphors imply that Madame Koto's powers now serve as channels through which to heal the forest's destruction. Instead of acting as simple opposites on the issue of shamanic practice, Dad and Madame Koto emerge as intertwining aspects of the same possibility, a possibility, moreover, that is available to all people although its undertaking is always fraught with danger.

The Famished Road and Songs of Enchantment are in themselves a record of and a program for the symbolic mediation of the supra-human for human well-being. Azaro's psychic ability to see into the "margins and tangents of vision," in cracks, through masks and other people's dreams emphasises the multifaceted modes of perception which can lead to deeper ways of seeing and knowing. Xavier Garnier's paper expresses a similar idea except that he concentrates on the various mechanisms that Okri uses to make the invisible visible.

Tout ce que nos yeux embrigadés nous entraînent à classer dans l'imaginaire" ou l'onirique", Okri le replace au cœur du réel, comme son fond ultime. Le monde invisible n'est certainement pas au-delà du réel mais derrière les formes et toujours prêt à les faire fondre.16

[Everything that our shuttered eyes directs us to class as "imaginary" or "oneiretic", Okri places at the heart of

reality, as if these things are reality's ultimate depth. The invisible world is certainly not outside reality but behind form and ever ready to dissolve it] [my translation].

Gamier's interpretation brings to mind previous discussions of the Hindu concept of *māyā* and its expression of the hidden nature of reality. Thus notions concerning the limits of ordinary human sight appear to have currency in many cultures. Ironically, postmodern theory on the subjectivity of meaning and perception, like that propounded by Jean-François Lyotard and James Clifford, can be seen as materialistic expressions of *māyā* because subjectivity is a barrier to knowledge about the world. To circumvent these limitations, Okri's narratives suggest that altered forms of consciousness provide vehicles for greater access to both the hidden realities and to more trustworthy degrees of meaning since, in Okri, heightened levels of awareness are communal in nature rather than utterances from isolated subjectivities: in other words, Okri's dream perception posits some unknown or forgotten form of a collective unconscious where all thought, form and action are linked. Philosophy and art, medicine and the spirit merge in Okri's shamanic texts to form a curative and integrated picture of hope.

**wonder and riddles**

Another significant aspect of textual healing is found in Okri's ability to evoke wonder which, not unlike laughter, provokes an emotional state that is blessed with restorative properties. Despite Azaro's frequent confessions of terror, his mind, with its open sensitivity to a whole gamut of phenomena, invariably unearths wonder within moments of horror and in objects that were once taken as banal. In reply to the photographer's explanation of a camel's ability to survive in the desert, the child narrator declares, "I marvelled at the idea of such an animal" (TFR 190). This small traveller of the infinitely possible, who abides with three-headed spirits, malevolent masquerades and pregnant goddesses, maintains his sense of wonder and that is the ironic twist of Okri's art. Further, Azaro's account of events displays an even more pronounced example of Cassirer's "mythico-
religious" perception than that found in Head. Disparate events, symbols and ideas are linked in a kind of metaphorical ecosystem which embraces nature, human affairs and the supra-human forces. Azaro and his interlocutors establish some of the connections but, for the most part, that task is established by authorial design.

Like all the texts under discussion, Okri's narratives display a keen sense of motif design which is both explicit in his treatment of metaphors and half-hidden in networks of riddles. An example of the former are the clear links made between roads, politics, modernisation, the crime of deforestation and the dangers inherent in the community's failure to avail itself of traditional wisdom. The nature of riddles will be further addressed but, for now, let me point out that the great king's various manifestations constitute an example of indirect comprehension which relies on clues established through cumulative repetition. On the subject of physical transformations, the reader is soon aware that, at crucial points during each of Azaro's many crises, the image of the king's face flashes through his mind even though he is talking to a cat, following a two-legged dog, engrossed in the moon's luminous face or accepting a pen-knife from a midget. Thus, without being told directly, the reader gleans that the accumulation of odd forms signifies the king's transformations. The nature of Okri's unfinishable undertaking also means that there will be some connections that cannot be followed through to their conclusion. For example, the photographer and Helen's family of beggars are prominent characters who contribute to events and then disappear without explanation. The pressures of time and our limited capacity to absorb everything that happens around us means that some ideas can be pursued while others must remain unknown. At the same time, Okri's narrative style pushes against such limits in order to open the mind to transformation. Readers, Okri suggests, need to change their mode of seeing so that they can, like Azaro, make sense of the scrambled face of reality.

The two books can also be seen as a compendium of riddles. Some riddles are posed directly, as are all the variations of the "many riddles amongst us that neither the living nor the dead can answer" which proliferate in The Famished Road (TFR 488). In this instance, after trying to reason why he opts for life while
his friend Ade chooses the unborn, Azaro finally admits that no-one can answer such riddles because anything is possible "one way or another". Riddles about roads and rivers are primary tropes which circulate in the narratives to create multiple levels of meaning. Other phenomena form more oblique puzzles, like the unexplained preparations for the great political rally which never seems to eventuate. This riddle when linked to its parallel metaphors involves, as we shall see, a rather concise and crucial meaning. Since Okri points out that the African aesthetic is one "of possibilities, of labyrinths, of riddles--we love riddles--of paradoxes," it is worth pursuing the function of riddles a little further.\textsuperscript{17} James Fernandez's essay, "Edification by Puzzlement," claims that, in many African environments, riddles act as learning strategies. By connections established between the riddle image and its possible answers, riddles are analogies \textit{par excellence} in which the "audience is left to ponder for itself the mysterious connection between things which are established or implied by the riddles."\textsuperscript{18} For those who are particularly skilled in the creation and interpretation of riddles, the original analogy initiates "connections between experiences within domains and between domains ... [which form a] cognitive construction by suggestion of a larger integration of things, a larger whole."\textsuperscript{19} Cumulatively, riddles unify the cultural system by establishing links between human, natural and supernatural realms which, over time, amount to a remarkable, organising body of knowledge. Okri makes use of this strategy, for his riddles link all manner of disparate phenomena with his major metaphors (rivers, roads, hunger, songs, and the \textit{abiku} nature). Nation formation is linked to road-building; forestalled political maturity is equated with an \textit{abiku}-like cycle of non-commitment; and people's hunger extends to food, song, dream and enchantment. Ultimately, the text itself demonstrates Mum's simple, yet profound, observation: "All things are linked" (SOE 270). A riddle in itself, the three-headed spirit's

\textsuperscript{17} Wilkinson 88.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid 177-8.
explanation of paradox contextualises much of Fernandez's hypothesis of riddling: "From a certain point of view the universe seems to be composed of paradoxes. But everything resolves. That is the function of contradiction ... When you can see everything from every imaginable point of view you might begin to understand" (TFR 327). Of course, everything will not be resolved because it is impossible to "see everything from every imaginable point of view." Consequently, there will always be paradoxes in the universe and the riddles that attempt to resolve them. Riddles such as this one mark out rhetorical guidelines for the absorption of Okri's texts and underpin the holistic integration of his fictional cosmos.

communities and communication

Okri's canvas is vast and unfinishable for it is a story of the cosmos at a time when indigenous belief encounters Nigeria's neo-colonial modernism. It is a world bounded by natural and supra-human possibilities in which the nation-building politics of the modern world are as dangerous as they are promising. Okri suggests, however, that the present political climate of destruction is limited to a season or cycle of anomy since it is only a transitory, if painful, period within the overwhelmingly greater whole. People bearing their dreams through the suffering caused by greed, corruption and manipulation are ultimately the agency for the restoration of life's first principle after creation; the balance of all forces. As in Narayan, Farah and Head, the ordinary, vulnerable human being, who is willing to sacrifice his or her life for the good of others, has supreme value and a potent, if inexplicable, sanctity. Dad's story of the "good" man who was fated with death demonstrates the wisdom of selflessness and generosity. In acting for others, the man accepts transformations because his life, given to others, will prevail in not one, but many lives. As an alternative angle on reincarnation, this growth of the single life into many lives provides a blueprint for the transformative nature of Okri's latest work. He seems to suggest that the same dendritic design, which replicates the genesis of the cosmos's abundant variations from a single godhead, can be applied to the human spirit's transformations through time.

In order to recognise the writing's grounding in the supra-human, a cursory
knowledge of Nigerian worldviews is useful. I am guided here predominantly by accounts of Yoruba culture which, at the generalised conceptual level of my examination, appear to be consistent with the other ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria's fluid identity. The clues about which aspects of the culture to address ultimately come from the content and style of Okri's narratives. Some cultural features are patently Yoruba, like the antelope-woman tale which originates from (or is passed on through) the Ifa divination oracles. Elsewhere, concepts of a shaman-like vision are prevalent in one form or another across West Africa, if not throughout the continent as a whole. The system's most significant supra-human attribute, from Okri's point of view, is the spirit's pantheistic capacity to be within and thus to link all phenomena throughout the cosmos. In the anthropomorphic terms of the Yoruba worldview, links and bonds are made between the various communities of beings found in the cosmos.

The discussion below presents some of the different communities of beings that Okri incorporates, whether consciously or intuitively, into his textual efforts to enrich human perceptual powers. Rosalind Shaw's record of the Temne of West Africa and their ideas on "four-eyed" seers is particularly apt in relation to Okri. Shaw's informants explain about the co-existence of many worlds and their populations, adding, that generally "there is a darkness ... which hides them from us." However, some people "can penetrate the darkness and can see and participate in these worlds by virtue of possessing "four-eyed" vision, in which the two visible eyes of ordinary people are supplemented by two invisible eyes." Figuratively, Okri endeavours to open that second pair of eyes for his readers. When Madame Koto, her masquerade and the blind old sorcerer exert their powers over the community, the death-like blindness acts as a metaphor of people's inaction and collective insecurity. The inhabitants of the ghetto are ill "for lack of dreams" (SOE 157) because they have forgotten that it is "the light in the eyes that


21 Ibid.
sees" (SOE 261). In a similar vein, Phillip Peek talks about the way in which Yoruba divination symbols and ceremonies move participants out of their normal mode of thinking, "shaking them up in order to change their minds."22 Explanations of psychic perception are diverse but they all share the notion of a form of vision through which people can connect with other communities of beings.

Psychic vision must be capable of accommodating a worldview that in Soyinka's words "operates both through the cyclic concept of time and the animist interfusion of all matter and consciousness."23 Yoruba cosmology is one such inclusive system, in which many realms co-exist under an overarching supreme deity Olódümärè who, like Modimo in the Sotho-Tswana system, is less known and describable than the intermediaries who participate in and influence human affairs. The disparate populations of intermediaries found in the system respond to the human community's varying needs, so that a priest, like Dad's father, would contact Ogun, the deity of roads, over serious matters but seek a spirit of place to supervise family journeys or hunting expeditions. As well as the deities and the gregarious spirits, there are also "towns" or domains in the Yoruba cosmos for the unborn (Azaro's companions), the recent dead (the Yellow Jaguar) and the more venerated ancestors (the African Way). By tapping into various categories of beings, Okri is able to emphasise the communal nature of communication across the different spheres so that Azaro's frequent transition from "I" to "we" represents, by turns or mutually, the family, the ghetto and the cosmos.

Characteristically, West African categories of supra-human beings depend on beliefs developed in different localities and at different moments in time. Nonetheless, broadly speaking and bearing in mind that fluidity is a strong cultural attribute, the deities have a mythological stature that represents society's most


cherished cultural values and most feared taboos. Consequently, though I name a few well-known deities, their importance and spheres of influence are always subject to change, as indeed are their chameleon-like personalities. Through Soyinka, the literary world is well acquainted with *Ogun*, the god of roads, weapons and artists amongst many other attributes, who is wont to be excessive, daring and transformative. *Obatala* "of the White Cloth" is said to personify temperance and patience, qualities that contrast with the attributes of *Shango*, the lightning god, whose tempestuous character can inflict catastrophe or, in his dichotomous role as god of electricity, can create wealth. On the female side, *Oya* is a curiously influential and mutable character:

Oya is a conundrum. She is a double goddess: not here but there, not there but here; on the side of death, on the side of life. As a river, the seemingly integral Oya is actually comprised of two streams, each with a radically different origin, flowing together now.24

Elsewhere, myth depicts her as split into nine fragments, but her transformations, ranging between the extremes of benevolent mother and untameable female desires, ultimately defy reification. Although Okri avoids naming any of these deities, the values and vulnerability each god encapsulates are everywhere apparent in the narrative. Mum's resilience suggests an affinity with *Obatala* who may anyway "be viewed as a feminine presence in masculine space."25 On the other hand, Mum's temperament tends towards the feminine principle in Yoruba terms which centres on a personality of equilibrium or "coolness" and the secretiveness that this trait is apt to generate. At the same time, Mum is not without a fiery spark or two, though not to the excessive degree found in Madame Koto where, in addition to her status as a "mother," an identification with the dynamic

24 Gleason, 51.

25 Ibid 86.
Oya is highly probable. The over-wrought cult preacher damns Madame Koto as the GREAT WHORE OF THE APOCALYPSE (TFR 377) and her vengeful whipping of the innocuous beggars displays something of her resemblance to the oft-feared goddess. However, Oya does appear in her own right in the ghetto's rainy season when "secret essences of a goddess [are seen to be] rising from the earth" (TFR 286) and as the hooded ferry-person of the rivers of death. The latter glimpse of Oya, in which she is revealed to be an indeterminate young-old woman with lion's paws and tiger's eyes, occurs when the three-headed spirit nearly succeeds in luring Azaro back to the unborn. Above all else, Oya's presence is a constant possibility within the river that runs beneath the narrative's roads. Dad exhibits most of the excessiveness seen in Madame Koto and is well-matched to a Shango-like identity as the following quotation so aptly illustrates. When he discovers that the unpaid creditors had removed the table, Dad "growled like an enraged lion, drew himself up to his fullest titanic height, stormed out of the room, and began raging down the passage so loudly that it seemed as though thunder had descended amongst us" (TFR 96). However, through his blind father, the Priest of the God of Roads, Dad is inherently an Ogun follower.

Spirits, in contrast, teem in and out of Azaro's vision. I would suggest that Okri addresses spirits directly because they are by nature even less definable than the deities. They represent phenomena which may be hidden within the layered nature of the cosmos and their unpredictable appearances and behaviour are well suited to the kind of perception which Okri explores. Spirits may be anthropomorphically conceived, but they are more often than not thought of as powers which are almost abstract, as shades or vapours which take on human shape; they are immaterial and incorporeal beings. They are so constituted that they can assume various dimensions whenever they wish to be "seen."

In Azaro's vision spirits are a chaotic and colourful presence. At times, they walk through people as both groups pursue their business in the crowded market and, elsewhere, they stand in for people, filling Madame Koto's bar with their borrowed bits of the human body which do not quite cohere in the right way. Apart from the value which Okri draws from their surprising and mischievous natures, spirits are perceived as dwelling in realms that are, according to Shaw, places "of vision and understanding, revealing an epistemological classification of space which is also apparent in the description of the world of the ancestors ... as the "place of truths."\textsuperscript{27} The spirits give Azaro first-hand knowledge of the illusory nature of appearances and their powers demonstrate how masks can act as lenses which reflect the motivations of the viewer as much as they can convey any objective reality belonging to the external world. In other words, the various tricks available to the spirits raise serious issues about the nature of reality and the role played by subjectivity in our perception of that reality. Although expressed differently, these ideas converge, more or less, with western notions about what constitutes knowledge.

From another point of view, the form of knowledge which operates in this "place of truths" corresponds with the mythopoetic communication of Soyinka's "fourth stage," so called because it is the fourth realm in his scheme of the unborn, the living and the dead. He describes the "fourth stage" as "the dark continuum of transition where occurs the inner-transmutation of essence-ideal and materiality. It houses the ultimate expression of the cosmic will."\textsuperscript{28} For Soyinka a mythopoetic truth abides in this abyss or liminal threshold into which \textit{Ogun} plunged at the time of creation and to which the human spirit must continually return, especially in phases of crisis. The transactions between human populations and the supra-human, which take place in the "fourth stage," deal with a form of knowledge and

\textsuperscript{27} Rosalind Shaw, "Splitting Truths from Darkness: Epistemological Aspects of Temne Divination," 143.

power that is widely practised and respected in traditional communities but which remains totally foreign to western ideas. Although the "fourth stage" is essentially a ritual notion, the altered sense of consciousness that the ritual generates is closely related to the liminal spaces tapped by dreamers or shamans. Therefore, the dangers that lie at the core of Soyinka's conceptual abyss are found to be equally at work when Dad tests his will against injustice. For this reason, Dad must fight with something more than muscle and intelligence, something which originates, ironically, from the same space or "stage" as the perils that he confronts. In Azaro's words: "Suddenly, with his curious ability to reach into deep places in his spirit, a ferocious energy swirled around Dad" (TFR 470). Thus, the knowledge or, in this example, the power gained is none other than the "powers" from the supra-human sought by the shaman. In West African contexts, the knowledge exchange which takes place in these liminal spaces is crucial to cultural well-being for the experience is said to be the means to restore the social equilibrium which the culture upholds as an ideal. In Okri, entering liminal space is somewhat akin to the evil depths which Elizabeth has to endure before she begins to learn about the resilience of goodness, except that, in West African contexts, equilibrium and chaos replace the opposition between goodness and evil. Chaos, like Elizabeth's Dan, is nonetheless a consummate teacher.

**balance and spectacle**

The co-existent populations found in the Yoruba cosmos contribute to people's appreciation of movement. Beginning with rocks, which from a scientific point of view are inanimate, everything in the cosmos moves in an anthropomorphic sense. Wande Abimbola informs us that at "a certain level of understanding in Yoruba thought, there is no such thing as a non-living thing. Every object and creature of this earth can be made to come alive and participate in an important endeavour."29 Azaro encounters a black rock that "gave off the

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living smell of a great human body" and flees from "its monstrous freakishness" (SOE 233). Invariably, Azaro's observations matter less than the interconnections established throughout his roller-coaster ride between horror and wonder which, in this case, relate the rock to the neglected rotting corpse. When dad positions the "black rock of enigmas," at the grave-head, the rock's "fiendish and semi-sacred" nature is acknowledged (SOE 285). It could be that the man's spirit has invaded the rock but, more importantly, the rock represents a living tissue connected (or susceptible) to the agonies of the man's soul. Considering the sheer diversity and density of living things in motion, it is no wonder that some form of equilibrium or balance is a prime cultural value.

In two studies of ritual ceremonies, Robert Thompson on the Egungun and Henry and Margaret Drewal on Gelede, dance is seen as the conceptual centre of the masquerading. Both ceremonies invite the respective male and female deities momentarily to inhabit the masked and sacred costumes worn by selected members of their cults. Parallels with the Hindu symbolism of "cosmic dance" as well as with the aesthetic state of rasa achieved by the dancer can be drawn because, in Yoruba ritual contexts, the harmony of the dancer's cross-rhythms signal the presence of the deities. Mwabumka Shamakondo explains the process to Thompson: "You take one morsel from one rhythm, a morsel from another rhythm, and you play with all these patterns in your body ... The form comes from the heart ... and it gives you deep pleasure." Shamakondo's description of the dancer's body is analogous to the Yoruba cosmic body through which multitudes of elements improvise with interconnected yet discrete metaphorical rhythms. For the dancer as for the cosmos, the highest achievement is to attain an equilibrium between the contributing rhythms, described by the Yoruba as "coolness." Moreover, the concept of "coolness" incorporates ideas about light, visibility (honesty), clarity, luminosity and smoothness. When these qualities are apparent in a person's behaviour or action, the individual is said to have achieved a personal transformation through the purified source of power or ase. Thompson's summary

of the auspicious "coolness" displayed in masquerades could be applied to Okri's evocative description of dad re-dreaming the world. Thompson, as shown below, is concerned with the body's symbolism while Okri employs verbal symbolism to invoke conceptual balance:

The equilibrium struck, never static but constantly re-achieved, transformed the lessons of the past into an intensely visualized glowing present. He [the dancer] had mastered the secrets of beauty, which are also truth and goodness, and realized their end is never reached. Communion with the gods depends on man passionately exceeding himself. He spun a score of times, without losing equilibrium, and disappeared. The purifying wind of coolness, the wind of God, had balanced briefly on the head of man.\textsuperscript{31}

It may be said that God, similarly, is present in dad's incantations when the sinister forces are challenged and equilibrium is regained. Even if tenuous, the family's moments of "coolness" temporarily release them from their arduous struggle against poverty and injustice. From Okri's point of view, the knowledge that the state of "coolness" continues to be an attainable possibility overrides disadvantages arising from its evanescent properties. Here Dad proffers \textit{The Famished Road}'s version of "coolness":

Leopards and lions of the spirit world, dragons of justice, winged tigers of truth, fierce animals of the divine, forces that swirl in the midst of inexorable hurricanes, they too restore balances and feed on the chimeras and vile intentions of the open air ... for every power on the sides

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid 225-6.
of those that feed on the earth's blood, a fabulous angel is born (TFR 496).

People's faith in the attainment of a fleeting cosmic balance is comparable with the Hinduism's notion of the "cosmic dance" which encapsulates the ongoing processes of creation and destruction. Both sets of ideas display a keen awareness of cyclical movement through time, processes, in other words, which express the tensions found in the ongoing interaction between cultural change and continuity.

Closely associated with the deep respect and awe aroused by displays of "coolness" is the conceptual understanding which underpins the word *iran* (*irun*). In masquerade contexts, *iran* roughly translates as "a spectacle." The Drewals map an impressive semantic paradigm around the term which illustrates the relatedness of things in Yoruba thinking and, in so doing, explains the supra-human aspects innate to Yoruba art. In its broadest sense, *iran* means "a fleeting, transitory phenomenon" which constitutes a display or performance for and of the gods or ancestors. Equally attributable to "mental images," *iran* thus bears connotations of mystical vision. Since storytelling creates the illusion of actualised events and makes visible "pictures to be looked at," oral narratives are, likewise, considered to be "spectacles". In sum, *iran* is efficacious because it "possesses the performative power of *ase*, the power to bring things into actual existence" and is the force which permeates all things from rocks to utterances. Thus, Okri's writing can be considered as an expression of *iran* which projects verbal pictures that offer *ase* to a reading community that may have forgotten, or are unaware, of the profound


33 Drewal & Drewal, 5. Yansi "dream tellers" (Zaire) exhibit a similar sense of performance: they are "those storytellers whom it is believed are able by the power of their performance to stun their audiences into a state of dreaming." Mubuy Mubay Mpier, "Dreams Among the Yansi." *Dreaming, Religion and Society in Africa*, Jedrej and Shaw eds. Leiden, Brill (1992): 104.
wisdom on which his culture is founded. Viewed from another direction, the notion of bringing pictures (symbols) into the mind resembles the symbolic mediation process through which the shaman communicates the powers from the supra-human \( (\text{ase}) \) to his or her community. The \textit{abiku} books can be seen as an emanation of \textit{iran} or the "spectacle" of divine presence wherein Okri the shaman mediates the powers of the cosmos into narratives of symbolic language.

Ideal cosmic balance and "spectacles" which induce divine presence are momentary experiences amid the overwhelming oppression and failure characteristic of ghetto life, yet, Okri's narratives maintain the conviction that, with sufficient effort, people can re-achieve such experiential high points in their lives. The final pages of both books express the human spirit's simultaneous acceptance of the odds placed against the achievement of ideals and its obstinate pursuit of those same ideals. When Dad recovers from his loss of consciousness due to another boxing match with a spirit, he brings messages from the courts of the spirits urging people to remember their potential. However, the next morning the old struggle recommences and Azaro is left alone on the mat, reflecting: "A dream can be the highest point of a life" (TFR 500). At the tail-end of all manner of dream activity, Azaro's reflection is understated comic irony and, concurrently, a poignant recognition of human deficiency when faced with the promise of \textit{ase}. \textit{Songs of Enchantment}'s climax mirrors Azaro's former comment because dad's re-dreaming, literally, re-creates life. Like its forerunner, \textit{Songs of Enchantment} culminates the spectacle of cosmic balance with a return to the true wretchedness of the ghetto: "while dad stared at our abode, at the bald facts of our lives, and at the narrow spaces we had been living in all this time, mum retreated to bed with the heavy sigh of one for whom it had all been foretold" (SOE 291). Riddles continue to preoccupy Azaro's thoughts as he reflects that his spirit companions "had forgotten that for the living life is a story and a song, but for the dead life is a dream. I had been living the story, the song, and the dream" (SOE 293). Is this an enigmatic reference to the marvel of life even when grounded in squalor? The radiance of Azaro's dream adventures suggests such a conclusion. As if to reinforce the point, Okri concludes his tale with an earthy-come-enchanted dialogue between the two
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abiku boys which culminates in the songs and riddles sung by the Blessed Souls in "the heavens hidden behind our ordinary lives" (SOE 297). Azaro returns to the family room, where little and everything has been transformed, to murmur his closing thought: "Maybe one day we will see that beyond our chaos there could always be new sunlight, and serenity" (SOE 297). On that day, human perception will achieve its most marvellous transformation and balance.

roads, songs and abikus

In the Jean Ross interview, Okri explains the metaphorical method which underpins his writing style. There are aphorisms like

"Don't walk on the hungry road," and it's saying very simple things, but at the same time, because hungry has got very many meanings, and road has got very many meanings--and it can be the road that human beings travel and the road that spirits travel or the road that destinies travel or the road that thoughts and feelings travel--all of these are resonant in one's being at the same time one is using a simple word like that.34

Fundamentally, the road is the centre of ghetto life and simple physical hunger is the inhabitants' principal concern. On this base, Okri constructs many layers of meaning which, whether weighted positively or negatively, collectively express the cultural ideal of balanced forces. Negative aspects of ghetto life are thus invariably offset with some marvellous prospect arising from the same environment. "Africa is a place of such bewildering phenomena," Okri has said, that "to come away struck by just the decay and the dirt and the despair tells you more about the

34 Ross, 338.
viewer than the view." In the metaphorical complex, one arterial road signifies the 
dubious policy of progress, murdering the forest for the sake of other people's 
transport and electricity, while another road thirsts for the blood of new cars and 
undisciplined drivers. Politicians of both orders map out roads to illegitimate power 
in plots that contrast with the mythic roads that link the human potential to eternity. 
However, myths and legends can also lead to dead-ends as in the case of Yellow 
Jaguar's invincibility and Madame Koto's witchcraft which, being born from human 
suspicion, are definitionally circumscribed. Then, there is the road of beauty and 
imagination that can never be completed, the roads of riddles that are never 
unravelled and, the most astonishing road of all, the road of the human spirit and 
its thirst for goodness and peace. Moreover, roads become inner tracks of meaning 
that possess "cruel and infinite imagination[s]" (TFR 114). At once tormented and 
fascinated by roads, Azaro sometimes feels that too many signs press down on him 
without any indication of which direction or explanation may be the most 
beneficial. Later, he observes that, despite the harshness of travelling the roads and 
the overabundance of signs, "it may be easier to live with the earth's boundaries 
than to be free in infinity" (TFR 487). Along the famished roads, there is always 
hope of transformation and, as the three-headed spirit explains, some dead people 
built a road to heaven because they want to experience pain and love, "to be 
imperfect in order to always have something to strive towards, which is beauty. 
They wanted also to know wonder and to live miracles. Death is too perfect" (TFR 
329). Road construction, seen from this angle, is thus equivalent to the re-dreaming 
act in Songs of Enchantment: both are metaphors of life's ceaseless resource of 
possibility even while its maintenance demands continual struggle. "Each new 
generation has to reconnect the origins for themselves" (TFR 330). Ultimately, the 
stories and maps of one's roads must be constantly redrawn through the 
transformative states of suffering:

Songs of Enchantment's roads lead to the songs that trace out paths from 
sorrow to sweetness. Rumours suggest that the forest's mysterious antelope-women

35 Diana Giese, "And the Winner: Myth and Modernity in Nigeria." The 
sing to lure inadvertent trespassers into the abyss, yet, their laments are lines from the song of the circling spirit who can see the ghetto paralysed in an era that is "twisted out of normal proportions" (SOE 3). In this novel, according to mum, the women sing about the ancestors' forgotten ways, "warning us not to change too much, not to disregard the earth" (SOE 79). Sound metaphors pervade many facets of experience like, for instance, in "the magic substance which the great God sprinkled in us and which sings with the flow of blood through the journeys of our lives" (SOE 51). The novel's crisis evolves on an aural plane where cries of grief mix with the discordant sounds of sorcery over the dead man's song that begs for release from his torment. Although dad recognises the sign of an incomplete burial and mum hears a child trying to be born, they remain temporarily captive to inertia. However, since the book is the song circle of the spirit, harmonies return with the Blessed souls who chant "WAKE UP, AND CHANGE YOUR DREAMS" (SOE 279).

The other significant metaphorical cluster that Azaro alludes to, but resists addressing explicitly until the latter stages of The Famished Road, is that of the abiku nature itself. The abiku's indecisive movement between life and the unborn is, as we shall see, the key to the nation's political stasis. Jacqueline Bardolph sees Azaro, like his fictional counterparts, Saleem of Rushdie's Midnight's Children and Askar of Farah's Maps, as following the example of their magic boy ancestor, Oscar of Günter Grass' The Tin Drum, in that they are all extraordinary boys who represent "a nation or a people at a particular time in their history."36 She places Azaro on the road to Nigerian independence but fails to notice that the rally's non-occurrence matches the unresolved nature of the abiku which, by extension to the political arena, symbolises an independence that is yet to be achieved. The narrative is not so much grounded in the pre-independence days of the fifties as in the stalemate of a nation that has acquired the title, but not the substance, of independence. Speaking with a rare tone of authority that resembles his creator, Azaro explains:

The spirit child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved, things bound up with failure and with fear of being, they all keep recurring, keep coming back; and in themselves they partake of the spirit-child’s condition. They keep coming and going till their time is right. History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit-child (TFR 487).

Instead of re-writing history in a political context, Okri stands against the current of much postcolonial polemics and writes about the forbearance and debilities of a people whose history has yet to achieve its transformation. The link between the abiku phenomenon and independence is initially proposed through the riddle of the great political rally. Like a moveable feast, the much discussed event, which should act as the showcase for political maturity, remains in a state of perpetual postponement or, like some of the odd beings that follow Azaro in the forest, the rally always stays the same distance away from its realisation. What Kumkum Sangari has said of Gabriel Garcia Marquez applies equally to Okri’s treatment of the rally: "The unsolved enigma ... is not an index of indeterminate reality, but the failure of the historical will of the people."37

In Songs of Enchantment, sorcery mirrors the civil wars and iniquities that have plagued the nation’s false independence which, dad concludes, are caused by the country’s failure to conduct the sacrifices required for its unique destiny. Azaro is "knocked about in the [blind] old man’s dream of a dying country that had not yet been born, a nation born and dying from a lack of vision, too much greed

and corruption, not enough love, too many divisions" (SOE 91). The remedy lies within the powers of "the great good dreamers [mum] and the slow secret realisers of great dreams [dad] to be stronger, to hold fast to the difficult light and to transcend themselves and become the legendary hidden heroes who transform the destiny of peoples and nations for the better" (SOE 113). In other words, perseverance and shamanic artists (or ordinary people conscious of a higher reality) are necessary to counter the society's negative gravity and "neutralise the spells and enchantments of the powerful witches who had been done injustice all their lives and who took out their revenge by sealing us within the poisoned cage of limitations and hunger" (SOE 276). It is psychic vision and commitment to the efficacy of transformation, rather than revenge, on which the individual, the family, the community and the nation's true liberation will be founded. Like Æzaro, who peers through the Masquerade's savage eyes for a more complete understanding of events, this form of seeing involves great effort and many mind-threatening risks. Similarly, the reader needs to peer into Azaro's observations and reflect on the interconnections between the *abiku* nature and politics to find the patterns of inaction and fear on which oppressive governments prey.

**Humour, stories and experimentation**

Other techniques that Okri enlists on his quest to open perceptual capacities include his wry humour, stories within stories and disorientation effects. Humour emerges with ease in conversational sequences which rely on that which is understated or unsaid. The following snippet of exchange tags an adventure during which both father and son are plummeted through the forest's multiple realms. Dad says, "We are in another world."/ "That is Madame Keto's place," I said (SOE 28). The bar is "another world" but dad confounds the different levels of reality to a preposterous degree. At other times, pent up frustrations are unleashed on innocent victims and painful situations turn into farce, like the instance in which dad clouts the chair for taking too long to answer his questions. With its characteristic subversion of expectations, humour fosters perceptual flexibility. Similarly, Okri's insertion of folk-tales tends to force the reader into accepting many
All things are

simultaneous levels of fictionality and, in so doing, encourages him or her to reflect upon the concomitant relationships between the different levels. Acting as the trigger for the climactic re-dreaming scene, the familiar West African antelope-woman folktale shows the effectiveness of the Chinese-box form of storytelling. Dad's version of the tale is part of the story of *Songs of Enchantment* which, in turn, is part of the ancient yet enduring Nigerian relationship with myths and storytellers. Moreover, dad incorporates the spirit leopard, who enters the room while the storytelling is in progress, into "the spell of his narration" (SOE 268). In other words, the various story levels interact in much the same way as riddles make connections across different domains and both networks parallel Azaro's slippage across dreams and other realms.

Furthermore, the changes to the original folktale, or that recorded in Judith Gleason from the Ifa oracles, relate to ideas expressed in *Songs of Enchantment* as a whole. Dad's embellishments include the young hunter's ability to interpret the forest's conversations, an ability linked to Okri's ecological stance and to the exploration of psychic perception; the flashes of light which precede the changes from antelope to woman that add to the novel's symbolic "light" repertoire; and the spirit leopard's entry into the storytelling at a crucial moment when the hunter promises to conceal the antelope-woman's identity. The contract of trust that is established between the hunter and the antelope-woman parallels dad and Azaro's trust in the "reality" of the spirit leopard. According to dad's tale, the hunter's greed (rather than the other wives' envy in the original version), instigates his downfall for he insists on pursuing the black antelope against the antelope-woman's wishes. In response, she turns into a leopard and devours him, unlike in Gleason where the wife murders the other envious wives. Thus Okri changes the moral of the tale from the pitfalls of jealousy to the flawed sight induced by greed, forgetfulness and broken promises. Furthermore, the antelope-transformed-into-the-leopard scenario (the alternative reality) is depicted as being more powerful than the limited realm of ignorant humans. Ironically, although mum is not party to the sight which allows dad (who is blind at the time) and Azaro to see the spirit leopard, her interjections and final comment frame this remarkable piece of storytelling. "All things are
linked," she says, echoing her own story of the blue sun-glasses. The unfinishable tale contains unending interconnections.

T.J. Cribb, speaking of Okri's early work, raises the issue of how Okri utilises alternative cultural assumptions to engage the reader. For example, he points out that "feelings transform into warnings and messages from the other creatures in the world to the man who shares it with them." By the same token, identity is not a strictly personal phenomenon but exists outside of the body, in the resonances of personal names. Cribb refrains from speaking directly of supra-human presence (rightly so at this stage of Okri's development) and suggests that Okri's treatment of cultural modes elicits meanings out of contemporary crises because "we live in a world [that is] even more haunted, more loaded with meanings ... more absurd, more hungry for miracles and more daily miraculous." Though Cribb's reading bears merit, the appearance of The Famished Road and Songs of Enchantment demonstrate that spirits speak from all sorts of matter and bodies and that identity is intermeshed in the cosmos in many unexpected ways.

Additionally, some of Okri's effects are more imaginative than culturally encoded like, for example, the huge array of insects and small creatures that litter his landscapes and rooms. As a populous presence in their own right, the creatures are the ordinary stuff of the Nigerian environment. However, their prominence in the narrative emphasises the peculiar horizontal levelling of a child's viewpoint that suggests, yet again, Okri's search for more fluid modes of perception. Elsewhere, Okri's experimentation with perceptual error enables him to convey feelings of panic when Azaro loses his mother in the marketplace. Finding no trace of Mum in the crowd, Azaro experiences a strange reversal:

I saw her writhing in a basket of eels. I saw her amongst the turtles in the plastic buckets. I saw her among the


39 Ibid 150.
amulets of the sellers of charms. I saw her all over the market, under strange eaves, in the wind that spread the woodsmoke and the rice chaffs; I felt her everywhere, but I couldn't break the riddle of the market's labyrinths where one path opened into a thousand faces, all of them different, most of them hungry in different ways (SOE 162).

As if the notion of an interconnected cosmos was taken to a literal extreme, Mum is in everything, just as everything suffers from hunger in one way or another. The disorientation is evoked by applying expressionistic techniques to indigenous ideas about worlds permeated by spirits. These sorts of techniques demonstrate how Okri's narratives "re-dream" the storytelling cosmos and make old ideas startlingly new.

Although West African concepts are deeply embedded in Okri's tale-in-two-volumes, his use of traditional material is transformative, if only because transformation is itself an African tradition. Walter van Beek and Thomas Blakely claim that African religions possess a "propensity for continuous transformation ... [which] permeates the ways that Africans have creatively acted upon ... new options and possibilities."40 New possibilities, in literary terms, begin with Okri's unique narrator, Azaro the abiku, whose omnipresent perception and childlike astonishment combine to make him an effective commentator on the interaction between world events and psychic encounters. Through dream imagery, metaphor and the symbolic networking of riddles, Azaro's story examines the multiple options available to human perception. Most importantly, he records his father's erratic schooling in the ways of shamanism and witnesses the healing born of Dad's deep engagement with the supra-human forces. These negotiations occur in levels of

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consciousness beyond the surfaces of everyday reality, in the dreams and out-of-body experiences which Okri sees as fertile grounds for social transformation. The process of shamanic healing, moreover, shapes the structure and content of Okri's story of ghetto life in postcolonial Nigeria, for the narratives replicate the shaman's journey in which symbolic messages are mediated from spirit realms to revitalise the human community. Okri suggests that only when people's minds are opened to heightened forms of perception will they be able to assume the responsibilities that national independence involves. Until such time, the nation, like the ghetto, will be trapped in a social, economic and political stasis caused by leaders who, like Madame Koto, lose control of their ambitions and forget the community of their beginnings. For Nigeria, the immediate future is bleak, yet Okri maintains faith in his country's mums and dads and their ability to revive the nobility of the spirit and thus bring "an incremental light to the earth" (SOE 113).
PART THREE: CLOWNS AND COMIC TRANSCENDENCE
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It was no good, he was caught in a strange middle ground, trapped between belief and disbelief.

Salman Rushdie

I shall devote the opening of the third section of this study to the relationship between comedy and supra-human affairs. The subject received some attention in previous discussions of the way in which Narayan's comic irony is integral to his evocation of Raju's "holiness" and how laughter, as a non-verbal means of expression, can convey a sense of a supra-human presence. Due to *The Guide*’s content, the narrative's connection between humour and the spirit is self-evident, which is not the case with the work of the other comic artist from the subcontinent, Salman Rushdie. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie presents Indian history and its unique relationship with Saleem Sinai, the narrator, as the focus of the narrative. What, then, qualifies Rushdie for consideration in a serious study on representations and evocations of the supra-human within new literatures in English? How can a comic writer and a self-confessed "secular" man whose writing, at face value, is indisputably iconoclastic be positioned beside Narayan and Farah's narratives on "holy" men and Head and Okri's explorations of shaman-like states of being?

In the first place, Rushdie's inclusion in, and location at the conclusion of this study poses a challenge to the rhetorical gravity normally associated with committed discussion on spiritual matters. His bombast and comic play with the narrative medium would seem more suited to parodying religious devotion and dogma than contributing to, or demonstrating respect for the mysterious aspects of human experience. Rushdie's inclusion, in fact, raises the question: are spiritual pursuits and comic writing, parodic or otherwise, mutually exclusive? Narayan's work clearly contradicts such suggestions but what about narratives that make no direct claims to the subject of spirituality? In the following chapter, I hope to persuade the reader that Rushdie's comic talent generates a concern for spirituality which is not readily discernible when his humorous style is treated separately from textual content. For a comedian like Rushdie, humour is a complex language of communication which
operates throughout the narrative and is, in a certain sense, an alternative story of a wayfaring soul.

My initial concern is the function of a comic style which is a self-conscious performance rather than a realistic description of events and is parodic rather than satirical. A reiteration of Raju's thoughts on the function of laughter in the context of dispute resolution provides a useful springboard for the discussion. He surmises that "the best solvent would be laughter rather than words. Words have a knack of breeding more words, whereas laughter, a deafening, roaring laughter, has a knack of swallowing everything up." The mediatory property of the act of laughing is an important factor in Rushdie's narratives, firstly, in terms of the mechanics of laughter and, secondly, in relation to Rushdie's ideas about art. If laughter is defined as a wordless communication which moves from the secular condition of thought--the mental recognition of incongruity in one situation or another--to a momentary altered state of "being"--in the act of laughing itself--then laughter can be said to effect a form of transcendence which is felt but never expressed verbally. The transitory moments of altered consciousness can be said to replicate, on a minimal scale, the psychic healing journeys of the shaman. Laughter, functioning as a mediatory and healing mechanism, gives a sense of well-being to those who laugh. At the same time, humour, whether treated from the perspective of the artist or the audience/reader, tends to resist translation into critical terms or, if translated, invariably loses its "funniness" and thus its impact. This difficulty aside, I would suggest that artists of the comic medium attach no ultimate value to seriousness but esteem, instead, the healing and transcendent qualities of laughter precipitated by their work. Comedians seem to be driven by desires to transform the hypocrisy, horror, stupidity and pain of their subject matter into spiritually-uplifting moments that transcend and, at the same time, address the seriousness of their material. It must be noted that not all comedians work in this way, as in the instance of Swift whose satirical works are characteristically abusive and socially divisive. Rushdie's Shame, in its bitter attack on Pakistani corruption and fanaticism, often approaches

this derogatory type of genre. In *Midnight's Children*, however, the exuberance behind his parodic verve is, despite Saleem's occasional biting commentaries, unmistakably life-affirming.

The comic craft's mediation of serious material, through the minimal transformative powers of laughter, to create an alternative understanding of the events or situations in question approximates, in many respects, Rushdie's position on the function of art. In speaking of Carlos Fuentes, Rushdie observes, that the Mexican writer

poses the question I have been asking myself throughout my life as a writer: *Can the religious mentality survive outside of religious dogma and hierarchy?* Which is to say:

Can art be the third principle that mediates between the material and spiritual worlds; might it, by "swallowing" both worlds, offer us something new—something that might even be called a secular definition of transcendence? ... What I mean by transcendence is that flight of the human spirit outside the confines of the material, physical existence which all of us, secular or religious, experience on at least a few occasions [birth, love, joy and maybe death] ... It is for art to capture that experience, to offer it to, in the case of literature, its readers; to be, for a secular, materialist culture, some sort of replacement for what the love of god offers in the world of faith.

Art, understood in these terms, mediates and potentially transcends the separation of material and spiritual worlds because, in art, both worlds meet. This very particular notion of what art can accomplish verges on a mystical reading of the

creative process which, I believe, is consistent with Rushdie's background and writing. The test is to apply such a belief to the art of his own making and to find evidence in *Midnight's Children* of a transcendent fusion of spiritual and material realms. If Rushdie is true to his words, the supra-human potential—in this case, "secular" transcendence—resides in or parallels the novel's parody of Indian history and politics and its subversion of European master narratives in a post-colonial setting. This investigation is the material of "The Supra-human Hyphen: Salman Rushdie's Clown Writery."

The second matter that I would like to raise in this introduction is the issue of genre. I will argue that *Midnight's Children* is a clowning genre in order to highlight the performative nature of Saleem's narrative; Rushdie's connection with the Indian tradition of *vidūśakas* (clown figures); and, most significantly, the correspondence between Rushdie's creative role and the nature of the "ritual" clown. Notions of supra-humanness, found in the narrative, arise most clearly from an identification of Rushdie's art with the practice of ritual clowns who are said to be an "indisputable masters of the boundaries."\(^3\) This figure straddles the material and spiritual worlds and "upends any configuration of meaning into which it enters, so it takes apart context and opens the way to the cohering of alternative patterns of meaning."\(^4\) The clown's incomplete identity is thought to be characteristic of transformative natures that are somehow out of place with the general mores of the society. Neither insane nor shamanic, ritual clowns, in certain contexts, nonetheless, provide the means for people to make contact with supra-human phenomena. Two of the major themes that underpin *Midnight's Children*, pluralism and the acceptance of the contradictory states of belief and disbelief, are alternative expressions of the boundary-straddling and incompleteness that characterise ritual clowns. Furthermore, the narrative constantly upends configurations of meaning to facilitate the emergence of new and challenging messages. Where the role of the

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ritual clown differs from the narrative of Saleem's performance is in the status of the supra-human entity that is posited: for the former, the supra-human is culturally understood to exist, whereas for Rushdie, the supra-human is a proposition of an unknowable potential which can neither be proved nor refuted. The contradiction in terms of "unknowable potential" is intentional on my part for I wish to use the paradox to point out the correspondence between Rushdie's art and Don Handelman's concluding observation on the ambiguous nature of ritual clowns.

If the figure of the clown is apprehended as a complex device that unlocks perception to an awareness of the artifice of textual coherence, then it is comprehended also as a dynamic device that enables certain religious occasions to be enacted and accomplished. 5

Failure, as well as success, is inherent in this ambiguous interface of artifice and supra-human encounter. This is the crucial tension in the clowning enterprise on which Rushdie embarks in Midnight's Children, a tension which the clown cannot escape. In the context of Rushdie's claim that "art [can be] the third principle that mediates between the material and spiritual worlds" (103), I will examine the ways in which a clowning narrative mediates Saleem's many tales of India through the (albeit transitory) transcendence of provoked laughter. Of ongoing concern is also the genre's characteristic tension between the artifice of performance and the potential of a supra-humanness of multiple origins and plural aspects.

5 Ibid.
THE SUPRA-HUMAN HYPHEN:
SALMAN RUSHDIE'S CLOWN WRITERY
THE SUPRA-HUMAN HYPHEN: 
SALMAN RUSHDIE'S CLOWN WRITERY

Yet I must cling with all my might to that chameleon, that chimera, that shape-shifter, my own soul, must hold on to its mischievous, iconoclastic, out-of-step clown-instances, no matter how great the storm. And if that plunges me into contradiction and paradox, so be it; I've lived in that messy ocean all my life. I've fished in it for my art.

Salman Rushdie

Salman Rushdie's Indian novel, *Midnight's Children*, is a foray into the terrain of laughter and fun describing the life of a boy from Bombay that runs the gamut of Indian history from 1915 to the end of the seventies. Preoccupied with setting the records straight, the erstwhile boy narrator, Saleem Sinai, embarks on the ludicrous task of trying to validate his place at the centre of these events. His claim to centrality relies on his time of birth which is said to have occurred on the first stroke of midnight of the nation's tryst with independence, August 14th, 1947. What he succeeds in constructing, through a narrative that consciously mirrors the teeming crowds and diversity of the subcontinent, is a complex artifice which inverts fact and fiction alike. Beneath the verve of Saleem's rush to divulge his "meaning," a network of subterfuges and reversals undermines his extravagant claims. Indeed, after the metafictional maze is unmasked, Saleem is found to be an extremely peripheral figure even, as I shall later explain, nothing other than a failed fictional idea.

One of the most obvious ways in which Rushdie's art works towards a spiritual plane is found in his counter-pointing of Saleem's bid for centrality with a plea for the many and varied forms of plurality, diversity, hybridity and mongrelization that are available within human experience. Centrality is shown to be a false and narrow concept while plurality, which includes the all-important meeting of material and spiritual worlds, is upheld as the moral norm. Rushdie's insistence on multiplicity and mixing across all phenomena is aligned with a
concurrent belief in the creative and epistemological value of doubt, uncertainty and paradox. This disposition recalls Farah's when he comments that "I usually doubt almost everything, and therefore, because I doubt, I would look at different possibilities of looking at the same thing." Similarly and perhaps more importantly, Rushdie's principle of uncertainty resembles Narayan's irony which, due to its close association with the Hindu concept of māyā, revels in the surprising nature of error and illusion. As noted in my chapter on Narayan, māyā conceals the deeper "reality," consciousness or brahman from human perception. In Narayan's writing, for example, māyā embroils characters in all manner of misconceptions, ill-fitting masks and delusions. Nonetheless, beyond the veil of concealment by which the errors are generated, Narayan's work manifests an orthodox reading of māyā which holds that deeper "realities" do exist. Rushdie, it seems to me, while exploring the same material, would differ on this point and insist that the concept of māyā be, unconditionally, applied to the deeper "realities" as well. Māyā's inherent capacity to play absurd tricks with doubtful surfaces provides fertile material for both writers' comic visions, a point which emerges in Saleem's speech on the subject: "Maya ... may be defined as all that is illusory, as trickery, artifice and deceit. Apparitions, phantasms, mirages, sleight-of-hand, the seeming form of things: all these are parts of Maya" (211). The speech indicates, however, that Rushdie's concern with the capacity of māyā to facilitate multiplicity and mixing is markedly of this world, of a world that is not readily given to dissolution into some all-embracing form of consciousness. Therefore, to make allowances for the disparity between the two authors' handling of māyā, I suggest that, in Rushdie's case, the concept of māyā be hypothetically hybridised with another mystical system that features in his work, Sufism. In so doing, we have an approach which begins to explain the sense of spirituality emerging from his art wherein a complex interrelationship between plurality, uncertainty and paradox creates new possibilities. In abstraction, the spiritual hybrid, advocated through Rushdie's writing, is characterised by a belief

that unlikely combinations of material and spiritual ideas can create new ways of understanding which are free from dogmatic and absolutist tendencies but which, nonetheless, maintain a sense of connectedness with the myths of origins. In fact, Rushdie’s preoccupation with origins, as noted by Mujeebuddin Syed in "Midnight’s Children and Its Indian Con-Texts," recalls Eliade’s hypothesis of the human need constantly to retrieve the culture’s symbolic sources. This narrative tendency places Rushdie together with Narayan in developing new stories from ancient myths. Thus, an element of Rushdie’s art of the "third principle that mediates between the material and spiritual worlds" is the bringing together of ancient metaphysical stories with the material culture of contemporary affairs in order to pursue a new form of spiritual understanding.

The Sufi tradition of poets and storytellers, probably the most influential and controversial of that order to emerge from Islam through the centuries, is one such origin in Rushdie’s terms. The central tenet of this diversified and personalised faith is the proposition that "there is naught but God." In other words, the sum total of each and every aspect of this world, including all its evil manifestations, is God or, alternatively, worldly multiplicity is God. The pantheistic proposition is simple and, yet, as well as exhibiting blasphemous tendencies with respect to orthodox Islam, "naught but God" openly admits the value of multiplicity and the truth or true-ness of paradox per se. However, from Rushdie’s standpoint, the term "God" is just as problematic as the underlying certainty of a deeper "reality" beneath māyā’s play on doubt. Thus, Rushdie’s new form of spiritual possibility could be said to be embodied in the proposition that "there is everything and naught but māyā." The hybridisation of the two spiritual systems may appear pure sophistry but the important issue in Rushdie’s vision, over and above the multiplicity and uncertainty paradox, is to allow for a continuity with traditions and origins. In the Rushdie


project, concepts are cross-fertilised rather than disbanded. Not committed in any religious sense to Hinduism or Sufism, Rushdie is, nevertheless, culturally implicated in their worldviews, a connection which is evident in the respect given to their stories and myths in his comic narratives. Rushdie's paradoxical affirmation of and resistance to the possibility that there is more to the human experience than can be proven on empirical grounds, that there is a supra-human dimension to the human condition is encapsulated in Saleem's description of grandfather Aziz who is "knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve" (12). With the qualification that God in our theoretical discussion represents all spiritual manifestations, the quotation captures the "in-between" nature of the supra-human possibility in Rushdie's writing.

The contradictory nature of Rushdie's plural ideal correlates in many ways with the essential ambiguity of a ritual clown's position between artifice and spiritual engagement. The clown creators provoke laughter and value the spiritually-uplifting moments that transcend and, at the same time, address the seriousness of their material. Given this valuing of comic vision and Rushdie's observation that "enjoyable comedy ... is never to be underrated as a motive for a writer," I believe that Rushdie's middle ground of supra-human possibility is best expressed by a comic metaphor. It seems reasonable to follow Saleem's advice, offered during the course of his farcical lesson for historians and literary critics, on the ways in which his life mirrors that of the Indian nation:

I must answer in adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term "modes of connection" composed of dualistically-combined configurations of the two pairs of opposed

4 Terry Lane, "An Interview with Salman Rushdie." The Interview, Australia, ABC Radio National, 10.05 PM, 10th September, 1995.
adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world.5

This nonsense send-up of scientific methodology epitomises one of the novel's fundamental premises: **hyphens are necessary.** The hyphen, with comic irony, signifies all that is possible "in-between" phenomena and all that can be, with imagination and faith, joined together, commingled and mongrelised. Just as Rushdie envisions his cultural hybridity as the comma in the title of his book of short stories *East, West*, the hyphen is my metaphor for *Midnight's Children*‘s artistic blending of the sacred and the secular. When drawn by Rushdie’s comic spirit, a word-less mark, the hyphen, acquires worlds of words and expands, incongruously, to encompass the supra-human. This study began with a gentle ironist of small-town Malgudi and concludes with an urbanised, raucous and hyphenated comic. Yet, as disparate as their styles and historical placement may be, irony’s same tricky lineage links Narayan with Rushdie. Moreover, the two quite distinct and remarkable Indians find spiritual consciousness a curious but compelling subject. Perhaps, something—like *mâyā*—in the multi-formed Indian psyche is predisposed to incongruous appearances of the supra-human? An in-depth answer to that question is beyond the scope of the present discussion. Nonetheless, ethnic interaction, the high esteem and presence of epic tales in the culture and the philosophical uncertainty posed by notions such as *mâyā* seem, in the work of these two writers, to indicate that ironic positions on spirituality would not be unusual in the art of the subcontinent.

**personal and artistic plurality**

The hyphenated states which Rushdie exploits so effectively emerge logically

from his own personal background. In this respect, Rushdie's eclecticism contrasts with the Tamil Narayan who writes almost exclusively about the Hindu experience. Rushdie's cultural impurity is common knowledge but what is less appreciated is the significance of the particular configuration of influences that constitute his pluralist sense of identity. One of the most perceptive summaries of Rushdie's cultural hybridity and its problematic effect on various ethnically-positioned readers is found in the Moroccan writer Nadia Tazi's letter of support in For Rushdie: Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defense of Free Speech.

One does not easily just happen to be born a British citizen of Indian origin and of Muslim faith, all at one and the same time ... an identity such as this is unclassifiable a priori. It is neither truly Indian nor is it Muslim in the proper sense of the word; it is English only by adoption; and it is actually of Kashmiri-origin, Pakistani in spite of itself ... Or, according to various other points of view, this same identity of Rushdie's is too oriental for some, not Islamic enough for others; it comes out of the secularized Bombay school with all of its imperial style; it is overloaded with dialectics, flesh, gods, and History with a capital "H," not to speak of the various postmodern myths which attach to it ... it is even unlike its own self--or any other selves as well--and yet it cannot for all that remain the same without somehow exalting itself as another at the same time. 6

Further to Rushdie's personal circumstances, Sudhir Kakar's study of healing traditions in India makes the point that, compared to western ideas, Indian views

on personhood are "divisible" or more fluid in nature? This cultural disposition no doubt contributes to Rushdie's position vis-a-vis the amorphous nature of identity. He was born in June 1947, two months earlier than narrator Saleem and Indian independence, in Bombay, the most cosmopolitan of cities. Like the city, the grown man's work teems with contradiction in a babble of languages, cultures and social classes which somehow "leak" across defining borders even while remaining susceptible to inter-group or linguistic conflict.

Bombay's ethnic confusion provided the boy with a colourful, chaotic and sensuous normalcy which in part mirrored, and in part formed, his sense of a hybrid identity. Rushdie describes himself in many ways but the three main streams of influence converging in his childhood Bombay—that in themselves are already multi-cultural fusions—are Kashmiri Islam, Bombay Hinduism and Indian Britishness. Over and again, he states that "the Indian tradition has always been, and still is, a mixed tradition. The idea that there is such a thing as a pure Indian tradition is a kind of fallacy, the nature of Indian culture has always been multiplicity and plurality and mingling." Even school-days in Britain, as an extension of his British-styled education in Bombay, concurred with the boy's preconceptions of plurality. Everything changed, however, when his parents—no doubt due to racial intolerance—succumbed to the pressures of partition and moved the concept of "home" to Pakistan. By this single act, the impressionable young man lost his birthplace, birthrights and ingrained assumptions that ethnic tolerance and hybridity were the norm. Given such an experience, it is not surprising that, apart from Grimus, all Rushdie's work reflects, in one way or another, a "back to Born" (Bombay) compulsion set against an adult consciousness that his childhood "Born" no longer exists. How to compensate for the loss? Can the intellectualised and expatriate adult retrieve any sense of his childhood Bombay where divisions and conflicts in human relations appeared to be at a minimum? His solution was

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to write, write back and back again, not so much against the empire but against loss of the creative tolerance of Indian-ness. Rushdie's portrait of the milling metropolis, its billboards, cinema, and tetrapods reincarnated as Shiva lingams, its heterogeneous mass of colourful individuals, its language riots and jealous husbands and sons creates a rich chaotic texture that conveys Rushdie's affection for the city in which Saleem's tales begin and end.

Due to the encyclopaedic nature of Rushdie's fiction, critics tend to project their own preoccupations on his work: each makes a discovery and yet they invariably miss the point that the most significant characteristic of a Rushdie text and that which makes it more than the sum of the diverse readings is hybridity itself. While admitting my susceptibility to the same limited-frame trap, I wish to argue that an urgent pursuit of fusion, on the part of a Bombayite separated from his beginnings, propels Rushdie's impressive story-juggling skills. Head had to fuse in her fiction what her biological experience demonstrated and the socio-political environment denied her. Rushdie's writing exhibits a similar drive because he has tasted the unity of biology and culture and lost it. Among many other reasons, both write stories in order to heal the disjuncture between what the body represents and what the cultural terrain offers them as grounds for a sense of identity. This observation in no way denies their vastly different life-styles nor the moral variance in their personal crises but stresses, instead, the reason why fusion across many aspects of life and writing is crucial to an understanding of their fiction. Whatever has been said, then, about Rushdie's choice of the insidious coloniser's English language, his leftist socialist leanings, his inclinations to express class superiority, and the derogatory depictions of Islam, Pakistan and India that emerge from his westernised pen, Rushdie's deepest roots are in cosmopolitan Bombay which nourished a child's India of interactions between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Goans, Parsees, British and so forth. Rushdie says of himself and other writers who

9 In the Terry Lane interview, Rushdie confirmed his affection for Bombay which he observed "was very formative on the way I thought and on the way I write, I think. And I do see it as a wonderful optimistic way to live, to live in that hotch-potch mongrelised way."
live apart from their country of birth that

if we do look back, we must do so in the knowledge ... that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, **Indias of the mind** (my emphasis)\(^\text{10}\)

**Midnight's Children** is, thus, no more nor less than a memory book about Rushdie's India. Consequently, for all the literary allusions to Sterne, Cervantes, Dickens, Grass, Calvino and Garcia Marquez, there are infinitely more connections made with the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, Persian Sufi texts, *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, R.K. Narayan, G.V. Desani, the Bombay talkies and the inimitable oral story-teller. At the same time, Rushdie can attack, with much noise and nonsense, any of his formative influences: he stations himself as an iconoclast, a clown, a purveyor of notions and a doubter *par excellence*.

Establishing Rushdie's affiliation with mixtures also acts as a seeding ground for his comic craft's engagement with spiritual concerns. The contradiction and ambiguity, that arise from mixing phenomena into plural states, are fundamental to the mode of humour and spirituality found in **Midnight's Children**. Additionally, by virtue of the multiple tonalities of style and technique which Rushdie characteristically begs, borrows, steals and reconstructs from any source within reach, his comic writing is difficult to confine within any single genre. **Midnight's Children** is, indeed, one of those novels of a type which Henry James describes as "baggy monsters" though, given the previous discussion of Rushdie's cultural associations, it would seem advisable to pay attention to his own description of his work. He prefers to think of his writing as comparable with the Khajuraho temple's

world mountain on which "the sculptor, the maker of the temple, places as much as he possibly can ... it swarms with life, all forms of life."\(^{11}\) Over and above being an ironic quip on a standard western literary expression, the temple metaphor which Rushdie chooses to match James's image evokes, significantly, a Hindu location in which art and religion are in partnership. Such a choice on the part of a Muslim may seem incongruous, yet, it is consistent with the blurring of religions that occurs in \textit{Midnight's Children} and is indicative of the ease with which Rushdie accepts contradictory ideas. Furthermore, from a Hindu perspective, a partnership between art and religion is commonplace for, despite active philosophical traditions that ground knowledge in material terms and, thus, make clear distinctions between the two disciplines, art and the favoured aesthetic of \textit{rasa} remain firmly, if fluidly, enmeshed in mystical interconnectedness. Narayan's portrayal of the Rosie/ Nalini serpent dance is a fine example of a spiritual and emotional fervour which art is expected to stimulate between the performer and her audience. In \textit{Midnight's Children}, the sense of spiritual engagement emerges, not by direct characterisation, but through Rushdie's deft use of allusions, underground networks of symbols, polyvocality and the novel's comic spirit. Narayan evokes the spiritual unity of the artistic act in literal terms whereas Rushdie incorporates the cultural tendency to collapse art into spirituality in the craft of his writing.

A further aspect of interest in Rushdie's temple metaphor concerns the issue of "all forms of life" by which he means, like Okri and his "everywhereness," all phenomena, visible or otherwise. In common with Okri's use of an alternative worldview as the basis of how people may experience reality and Head's trust in the "actuality" of her dreamscapes, there is, from a Western point of view, a cultural unfamiliarity about Rushdie's writing that tends to distort the boundaries between that which is considered to be directly linked to empirical reality and that which is not. The disparity impedes transcultural agreement on the writing's genre. As Rushdie points out in the Wajsbrot interview, his technique deliberately aims to portray people and their gods as they are in the Indian setting and, at the same

\(^{11}\) Rushdie, "\textit{Midnight's Children} and Shame", 10.
time, endeavours to encapsulate the insanity of a world that may destroy itself at any moment.\textsuperscript{12} Archaic forms co-exist with technological demons even to the extent that they become indistinguishable from one another. Is that not Indian realism?

**a clowning narrative**

While discussions devoted to the dubious concept of reality reveal the challenge which writers like Rushdie, Okri and Head make to uncritical categorisation, it is Rushdie's comedy which provides the vital clue to the issue of genre. Consequently, Bharati Mukherjee's playful term for the novel, "superchip," is more astute than it may appear. "Superchip" is meant to convey the idea that Rushdie's humour carries information more rapidly than other more conventional forms of narrative.\textsuperscript{13} The term certainly captures this aspect of Rushdie's intellectual wit and contributes towards an analysis of the mysterious—if totally commonplace—nature of humour. However, "superchip" suggests a mechanistic view of the comic phenomena that is inconsistent with a humour which demonstrates concerns for openness and diversification as the optimum conditions for human well-being. Moreover, is not "superchip" a rather incongruous term for an Indian novel?

James Harrison's interpretation of the novel as a "comic epic" broadly indicates a narrative which parodies its epic forerunner by tracing the life and times of trifling characters who become enmeshed in implausible and incongruous adventures. Though an effective umbrella term for *Midnight's Children*, the generic "comic epic" conveys little about the nature of the narrative or the type of humour involved. On the other hand, though not dealing with comic aspects, David Price's

\textsuperscript{12} "[i]l faut donc utiliser une technique qui permette Dieu d'exister, comme ce divan. De toute façon, le naturalisme ne peut plus rendre compte de la réalité folle qui est la nôtre, ne vivons-nous pas dans un monde qui a la capacité de se détruire d'un moment à l'autre?" Cecile Wajbrot, "Salman Rushdie: Utiliser une technique qui permette à Dieu d'exister." Interview, *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, 449.22 (Octobre 1985): 22.

The idea of performance as being central to creation," Rushdie informs us, "is present in all Indian art." (my emphasis)15 Elsewhere and more specifically, he states that it is "impossible to overstress the fact that the oral narrative is the most important literary form in India."16 Without doubt, the oral storyteller is Rushdie's primary model, expressly with regard to the technique wherein masters of the art-form create loops of interacting stories that are metaphorically juggled and "embroidered in all kinds of wonderful ways."17 Apart from noting comedy's significance in his art and its capacity to deal with painful subjects, Rushdie has little to say on the subject. Nonetheless, the question must be asked: what sort of storyteller pushes the comic aspects of his performance to its limits? A clown? Expanding, therefore, on the performance aspect of Rushdie's comedy, I suggest that Saleem is, indeed, a clown who performs stories and that Midnight's Children best falls into a new, but hopefully useful, genre of "narrative clowning" which, in Rushdie's instance, possesses deep Indian roots. As clowns are as heterogeneous as any other human group, it is incumbent on me to define the term as precisely as is possible.

The slapstick, farce, word-play, puzzles, satire, zaniness, irony and energy that contribute to Rushdie's composite comic style requires a flexible approach. Lee Seigel's approach in Laughing Matters: The Comic Tradition in India would seem appropriate since Seigel acknowledges the varying cultural and temporal contexts of laughter and still holds the belief that the "causes of laughter, the feelings


17 Ibid.
expressed in laughter, and all that laughter does to and for us refuse to change." 18 Comic theory in India begins, as we discovered in reference to Narayan, with Bharata, the Sanskrit drama theorist who posits incongruity as the essential factor in the causes of laughter that he ascribes to the rasa of humour. At the other end of recorded time, Seigel distinguishes between satire and humour, proposing that the former exhibits incongruity between a character's inner impulses and outer postures, whereas the latter exhibits incongruity between the figure and an ordered, logical, reasonable world. Most often comedy is some mixture of satire's tendency to negate, and humour's tendency to affirm. Hybridity, as previously stressed, is a key concept in a Rushdie text so it follows that his comic writing would bring satire and humour together or, more interestingly, fold the two forms into the same "one-liner," absurd moment or character. Tensions, according to Seigel, arise because "[c]omedic figures always fail in some way to be what they are supposed to be." 19 Rushdie, as we shall see, employs that tension with respect to Saleem whose fictional status caves in around him at a crucial point in the narrative. That said, it must be remembered that we are dealing with comic communication where breakdowns and failures are not necessarily negative. When Rushdie exposes the extent of Saleem's artifice, which is also a measure of the reader's credulity, the moment is primarily not one of disaster but of amusement.

The emotional state of the one who provokes amusement is another matter. Seigel's analysis points out that although the clown's comic antics, characteristically, try to conceal internal feelings of sadness and loneliness, the "comedic voice, speaking lightly of heavy things, punctuating melancholy with its laughter, cannot hold out against the silence [of human solitude]." 20 A psychological reading of a clown's resistance to solitude could explain Saleem's rush to tell the whole story and his concurrent strategies to delay the moment of conclusion, prevaricating, as he


19 Ibid 28.

20 Ibid 47.
does at every opportunity, over digressions, interruptions and repetitions. Further, his disintegration at the novel's end, literally and ironically, ushers in the silence. Likewise, at a functional level, comic artists take the darker aspects of their subject matter on board and, consequently, can only participate vicariously in the possible healing and transcendence of laughter enjoyed by their audience. The disparity between a clown's behaviour and the laughter they provoke is given some attention in Don Handelman's discussion on the ritual clown figures's "ambiguous and ambivalent" natures. In certain conditions of social upheaval and strife, a ritual clown's outlandish secularity becomes the community's vehicle of contact with the sacred. At the same time, Handelman inverts Seigel's notion of laughter's agency against the fear of solitude when he argues that the ritual clown must be stilled: otherwise, "true to [the clown's] own rhythm and logic, [he] would continue to raise questions and doubts about such contexts, and so [he] would signify that even the experience of transcendence is artificial and transitory."

Can this explain Saleem's rapid deterioration in the novel's final chapter? Did Rushdie intervene and still his clown? One can only speculate over such matters and propose that the novel's ambiguous ending, with its contradictory tension between optimism and pessimism, indicates that Saleem loses his voice, after the demise of his metafictional artifice but before the mysteries of life have been exhausted. Significantly, the tension between the artifice and a possible engagement with the unknown supra-human potential is not resolved within the narrative. As with the clown's ambiguous nature, either possibility remains available.

Once again, therefore, we are dealing with a liminal, in-between, even an altered state of consciousness in the clown's interiority and in the audience/reader's laughter, with the distinction that the consciousness involved is firmly grounded in secularity. Definitionally, therefore, a "clowning narrative" is staged storytelling, set in a frame of suspended disbelief and performed with a sense of physicality. Blending satire with humour, the clown narrator, who is simultaneously the persona

in the action straddles the oppositional poles of adsurdity and spiritual fulfilment. Invariably haunting the clown’s performance are the paradoxical temporal limits which, if transgressed, threaten to reveal the artifice of the performance within and beyond its own frame. In other words, although strongly signposted as fictional, the narrative refers back to a possible meaninglessness of creator, performer and audience/reader outside the contexts of the performance. At the same time, humorous treatment of social and political concerns can draw out empathetic readings of those concerns. Above all else, the creator of a clowning narrative values the enigmatic spiritual engagement achieved in the laughing response to his or her performance. Before turning to Midnight's Children proper, however, I need to demonstrate how the notion of a clowning genre is linked with Rushdie’s particular hybridity, the pervasive spiritual climate of India.

Indian clowning traditions

In an early discussion of Midnight's Children, Rushdie enumerates some of the Indian allusions in the novel—Ganesh, Shiva and Parvati, the Bombay movies and orality—and adds that he feels "the book grows concentrically out of Indian elements." Are clown figures, then, a feature of Indian (Hindu) traditions and mythology? Rushdie provides the first clue through the novel’s appropriation of Ganesh, the inimitable patron deity of literature and a natural, divine clown with his mix-and-match body and broken tusk. Custom dictates that storytelling sessions begin with a dedication to Ganesh, such as the following, found in Seigel’s introduction to his study on Sanskrit comedy: "[H]ail Gañeśa, divine scrivener, honored at the beginning of books and journeys; obeisance to Gañeśa, potbellied, elephant-faced god, a rodent-riding comic spectacle, revered at the crossroads, a lord of transitions." Rushdie overturns custom and, instead, casts the deity in two leading roles, that of Saleem and the son-who-is-not-his-son, by way of the former’s grotesque nose and the latter’s huge ears because, on top of all the elephant-


23 Seigel, 3.
headed clown's other attributes, he, like Saleem and Aadam Sinai, suffers the notoriety of disputed parentage. It goes without saying that the most important identification between Saleem and Ganesh is their clowning aptitude. Additionally, Rushdie employs Ganesh in the ongoing dialectic between eastern and western allusions which, on this occasion, also serves to undermine—for those acquainted with Indian mythology—Saleem’s authority as a reliable narrator. Upset over Padma’s disappearance, Saleem grumbles: "When Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana, dictated his masterpiece to elephant-headed Ganesh, did the god walk out on him half-way?" (149). Using a typical clown strategy, Saleem proceeds straight on to other things, undaunted by the fact that he had just given the much-loved deity the wrong set of connections: Ganesh is the scribe not for Valmiki’s Ramayana but for Vyasa’s mammoth Mahabharata. Rather than satirise Ganesh, Rushdie’s treatment of the comic god implies an approval of a spiritual system in which humour’s incongruities are revered.

Correspondingly, Sanskrit drama encompasses a long tradition of notable clown figures, the most ancient of which appears to be the buffoonish vidūṣaka. "He is," Bharata explains, "a buck-toothed, dwarfish hunchback with a cleft-palate, bald head, yellow eyes, and a distorted face." Grotesque, ugly and earth-bound, the vidūṣaka counterpoints the love-lorn sensibilities of kings and the philosophical pretensions of the brahmins with his crude satire and, most significantly for Saleem, with an obsession about food. I will return to speak on a symbolic intertextuality concerning foodstuffs for this is crucial to any close reading of Midnight’s Children. Although the vidūṣaka debunks the hypocrisies of brahmins and kings, it must be

24 Rushdie uses the following version of the myth: "Ganesh was the child of the gods Shiva and Parvati ... Shiva thought Parvati had been fooling around ... so when Ganesh was born, Shiva lost his temper and cut off Ganesh’s head. Then he repented and rushed around heaven looking for a head to stick back onto the torso. The first one that came to hand was an elephant’s ... Saleem’s biography is also full of doubts about his parentage—it’s a murky thing" Jean W. Ross, "An Interview with Salman Rushdie, 1982." Contemporary Authors vol.111. Hal May ed. Detroit, Michigan, Gale Research (1984): 415.

25 Seigel, 19.
noted that these figures all operate within a cultural system that accepts, as a given, religious truth. The *vidūṣaka* criticises worldly appearances of believers, not the concept of religion. David Shulman explains that the *vidūṣaka* tradition developed into a much more articulate and all-round performance as is seen in the *Kūṭiyāṭam vidūṣaka*: this clown figure translates Sanskrit and Prakrit verses into "corrupt" human speech; he parodies the classics and criticises social shortcomings; and, as both character and commentator, he is, at once, inside and outside the play. The clown thus appears "as the true persona of the storyteller" and ancestor of the twentieth-century Saleem. Throughout *Midnight's Children*, Saleem makes much inventive play on the classics from the repertoire of Rushdie's three-way influences; he is highly critical of political corruption and the social disintegration preceding and following partition; and he is "as if" translating Indian history and related tales from the "official" British English into the vernacular of an Indianised English. Like the *vidūṣaka*, Rushdie's critical sights are on secular manifestations of injustice and stupidity, a position that is not synonymous with a denial of spiritual values.

Rushdie attributes *Midnight's Children*’s success to Saleem's takeover during the re-writing of an originally third-person manuscript which, from my perspective, would mark the metamorphosis of a written story into a "clowning narrative." I am not suggesting that Rushdie picked up a copy of Seigel or Shulman but, rather, that the tradition of an evolved form of *vidūṣaka* would be integral to the Indian psyche, surfacing perhaps in the Bombay talkies in all manner of guises and always evident in the performance of the oral storyteller. Together with the European models of character-actors like Sterne's Tristram Shandy and Grass's Oskar, the Indian clown narrator is, I suggest, a profound influence on the Saleem who emerged in the final manuscripts. It is Saleem, the twentieth-century *vidūṣaka* wired to storytellers and clowns across time and space, who opens the performance with his declaration that "there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the

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mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well" (9-10). The postured announcement, full of the rhetoric of twentieth-century advertising, is made to lure the audience and, with tongue-in-cheek, to match—or outdo—in terms of scale, India's prestigious epic storytellers. The latter is, of course, virtually impossible because it would be outrageous to compete with the original volume of an epic like the *Mahabharata*, much less with its accretions gained through time in the form of story, song, performance, film and video. At the same time, Saleem's mimicry of the epics raises another question: how faithful are his stories to the moral and spiritual purposes of the tradition? The answer, as ambiguous as it may be, lies, I believe, in the interplay between the novel's principal organising ideas—grandfather Aziz's "god-shaped hole" of belief and disbelief and Saleem's claim to centrality. The former, as the middle ground or hyphenated motif of the clown's ambiguous nature, endures, while the latter falls victim to its own subversions.

**an idea of centrality**

*Midnight's Children*, despite Rushdie's well-laid digressions and false trails, is based on a simple, if ludicrous, foundational hypothesis. What happens, Rushdie asks, if a peripheral figure, one of one thousand and one children born during the midnight hour of Indian independence, tries to concretise Jawaharlal Nehru's famous words in which the prime minister likens the auspicious night of August 14th, 1947, to the nation's "tryst with destiny"? Moreover, what if that same figure seizes on the unthinkable idea of centrality and control, of monotheism and authoritarian rule, in a subcontinent made giddy by an endless confluence of crowds, ethnicities and deities? Rushdie talks of Saleem being "the speck of dust that contained the beach or the universe ... [comically] because, of course, he doesn't really contain the world, he only thinks he does." Rushdie, therefore, intimates that only a comic figure—a clown no less—would attempt such an

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audacious feat. Since clowns traditionally improvise on actual rather than simply imaginative material, we need to ask what or who actually precipitated such an implausible idea? Nayantara Sahgal provides us with the clue when, writing about her aunt, Mrs Indira Gandhi, she states that the prime minister's sense of superiority developed to such an extreme degree around the time of the Emergency that Mrs Gandhi "passed 'through the looking glass' into the full-blown exotica of make-believe." Mrs Gandhi believed herself to be the supreme authority of and for India. What better material for a clown and for a writer constantly engaged with the perplexing divide between the real and the not-real than an actual and pivotal figure who transgresses that divide on the world's political stage? Saleem thus parodies the aberrant idea of centrality exemplified by the historical Indira Gandhi. His family story and its involvement in the political events of India mimics that of Indira and the Nehru family. Saleem situates his family-that-is-not-really-his-family centre stage just as Indira uses her family's prominence in politics--though not her father's liberal ideas--and the myth of the unrelated Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to secure her dictatorship. This interpretation varies from Neil Ten Kortenaar's reading of Saleem as the literalised metaphor of the "body" of the nation only insofar as my proposal accentuates the literal identification between an idea of centrality, embodied by Saleem and his putative family, and the Nehru dynasty.29 Saleem's audacity--like the prime minister's--is so effectively camouflaged by ancillary events and histories that Saleem's direct identification with his double, Indira, only emerges with any clarity in the latter stages of the novel when he retorts against the slogan 'India is Indira and Indira is India': "Were we competitors for centrality--was she gripped by a lust of meaning as profound as my own--and was that, was that why ...?" (420).

The unlikely doubling is characteristic of Rushdie's experimentation with characterisation in Grimus where he develops the central tenet of Farid ud-Din


Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. In the original Persian Sufi story, a hoopoe guides a group of birds on a journey to find the king Simorgh, a metaphor for God. At the journey's end, the birds "find that the Simorgh they have sought is none other than themselves. The moment depends on a pun--only thirty (si) birds (morgh) are left at the end of the Way and the *si morgh* meet the Simorgh, the goal of their quest." Likewise, *Grimus*'s hero, Flapping Eagle, finally encounters Grimus, the novel's pseudo god-figure, and a battle of wills or self-wills takes place. I use the term "self-will" deliberately because, as in the Sufi text, the two manifestly separate characters are ultimately revealed to be alternative aspects of a single persona. The dualism relies on an obscure conceptual argument which, like Attar's text, employs the paradoxical nature of mystical metaphors rather than logical reasoning. *Grimus* experiment with a doubleness of identity became prototypical of Rushdie's approach to characterisation and, although he appears more concerned with discovering an alternative concept of the self to concur with his plural identity, of playing coincidence tricks and testing the permutations of duality, there is also a sense of exploring, from a wholly secular perspective, that which lies outside empirical experience. The Saleem-Indira double in *Midnight's Children* is but one instance of the many dualisms--Saleem-Shiva, Padma-Parvati; grandfather Adaam-grandson Adaam; Methwold-Indira, and the multiple fathers and mothers adopted by Saleem--that appear in the narrative. Though Rushdie undisputedly satirises Indira Gandhi's appropriation of secular and divine authority, the doubling technique, concurrently, enables him to argue for the oppositional value of the multiplicity and uncertainty paradigm. "Any organisation," warns Rushdie, "which claims to have a total explanation of the world and an absolute prescriptive set of rules for how people should behave ... is going to be tyrannical." The Indira side of the double represents a false deification whereas Saleem, or rather his clown performance, presents the case for the multitudinous

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31 Lane radio interview.
and uncertain possibilities that will invariably arise if the imagination remains receptive, tolerant and open-ended. In simplistic terms, the latter is what the ancient history of the subcontinent had seemed to prove before Indira's head turned to the "make-believe" idea of centrality.

Since little critical attention had been given to the dialogic play between Indira's denial and Saleem's affirmation of diversity as the centre-piece of Rushdie's narrative juggling, the stylistics of multiple tales have, perhaps, displaced the novel's centre to its periphery. If the relationship is as crucial as I suggest, the Saleem-Indira duo must be both concealed and revealed within the greater narrative with an acute sense of timing. It could be said that Saleem-Rushdie's timing falters slightly inasmuch as Saleem's reaction to the Widow appears to arise from nowhere in the novel's latter stages though clues, indicative of the importance of "the Widow," constantly reappear in the text from Saleem's description of his feverish black and green nightmare onwards (207). Moreover, with hindsight, there is more to Nehru's letter to baby Saleem than is initially apparent: "We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (122). Ostensibly, the letter refers to the parallels and exaggerated conjunctions constructed by Saleem to demonstrate the correlation between the new nation and his family but the words also apply to Mrs Gandhi's later surveillance over Saleem and, metafictionally, to Saleem's mirror-image of the prime minister's belief in her right to rule India. Midnight's Children eschews the linear and follows, instead, loops and the unpredictable and ambiguous pathways of "snakes and ladders." Meanings often become apparent in the wake of over-turned information, a process which may proceed through a piecemeal accumulation of ideas--as in a growing recognition of Saleem's unreliability as a narrator--or through an abrupt revelation. The latter applies to the Mrs Gandhi and Saleem doubling which, once perceived, opens the reader's mind to the elaborate clusters of relationships projected onto the two different but equivalent characters. Saleem's artifice rubs off onto the historical Mrs Gandhi and, contrastively, the forms of multiplicity exhibited in Saleem's narrative technique, which run counter to his unfounded claims of centrality, unify in a clear expression of the novel's validation of plurality.
At the same time, plurality and diversity work against the notion of coherent and "unified" narratives which is not to say that the irregular form created will be meaningless or lacking in structure. On the contrary, Peter Brigg's paper demonstrates that Rushdie "creates wildly complicated realities nourished by the immense complexities of the real world and coloured by innumerable coincidences ... [in which] every detail and aspect of these creations is tied to every other."32 Once constructed, the complex artifice is then undermined, arguably to suggest "the important truth that reality is not susceptible to simple explanations."33 However, since Brigg bases his explanation on the arbitrariness of Saleem's assertion of importance, he concludes that the novel's message is the failure--and the human anguish that is therein produced--of modern nation states. There is an element of socio-political failure in the novel's unfolding but, in my reading, that failure is tied to the tyranny that an Indira Gandhi type of personality represents and, as I will discuss in due course, is tempered by the positive implications of Saleem's clowning and grandfather Aziz's "god-shaped hole" of belief and disbelief.

Allied to the idea of centrality is a condemnation of all that which separates or divides. The source of the various symbols that arise to this end is partition which, according to Saleem (and Rushdie over his shoulder), was a profoundly grave moment in the history of the subcontinent, caused principally by Mountbatten's "tick tock" haste and Ali Jinnah's inflexibility and coercion. The political decision to carve up the country led to a whole series of conflicts and abominations which Saleem describes with all the insanity that those acts merit: the Ayub Khan's "pepperpot" coup d'état of 1958 in Pakistan; the futile Indo-Pakistan war of the Rann of Kutch in September 1965; and the secession of Bangla Desh in 1971 which produced fratricide on a three-way axis (East and West Pakistan and India) and Saleem's grotesque crops of corpses. While highlighting the social fragmentation directly linked to partition, Rushdie projects the negative imagery of


33 Ibid 175.
division onto Indira's and Methwold's hair-styles since, as Saleem points out, the partition of the sub-continent is "an analogue of a prime minister's hair-style" (384). Although Mrs Gandhi was not responsible for the initial division of the subcontinent, her authoritarian rule exacerbated the ethnic and sectarian conflicts initiated therein. Moreover, her unilateral behaviour during the Emergency figuratively re-enacts the 1947 severance of the country except that, in this case, Indira separates her family from the rest of India. On another level, Mrs Gandhi's black and white "schizophrenic" hairstyle mirrors the division between the official "white" propaganda, released by Mrs Gandhi, and the unofficial "black" record of Emergency, exposed by Saleem. While obviously fabricated, Saleem's version of events points to the atrocities committed under the cover of the prime minister's public actions and pronouncements. Methwold's meticulously-parted hair-piece is less sinister than that of his partner-in-power Indira. Nonetheless, Methwold's parting bears connotations of the British system of "divide and rule," another factor contributing to the advent of partition. From Rushdie's personal perspective, partition led to the loss of the tolerance of Indian-ness so it is not surprising that he views partition as a misguided act that, in a general sense, severely limits people's ability to participate in a genuine pluralistic society. Figuratively, central authoritarian power and acts of division are agents that negate hybrid forms of experience and fragment socio-political diversity.

Paradoxically, at the comic end of the "divide and rule" scale is a young woman's act of love. To re-awaken her communist lover's interest, Mary Pereira performs an act of mercy for the son of a penniless family by swapping him with the son of a rich man. This body-swap turns out to be the Saleem-Shiva inversion. Therefore, when Saleem opens the novel's re-enactment of his-story with grandfather Doctor Aziz's return to Kashmir from Germany in 1915, he is actually describing the genealogy of Shiva's family. Because of the baby-swap, Saleem turns out to be the only one who does not belong, biologically, to the Aziz-Sinai family. Mrs Gandhi's family dominated Indian politics across the same time-scale as Saleem's story, from her grandfather Motilal Nehru, through her father Jawaharlal Nehru and on to herself (Gandhi by marriage) and her sons, the Nehru lineage
became Indira's single and blinkered truth. She destroyed her father's ideal of unity in plurality and, thus, the self-aggrandising Indira is, metaphorically, a family misfit like Saleem.

To tie the parallelism of Saleem and Indira to the denunciation of partition, Rushdie creates the one thousand and one midnight children who are "endowed with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous" (195). Metaphorically, the new nation's hope and inspiration, the children are potential deities, as we shall see, even if their miraculous features tend towards the freakish and the absurd. The powers of the principal trio, Saleem, Shiva and Parvati, provide a representative sampling of the wide variety of gifts possessed by their brothers and sisters in magic. Blocked sinuses open the radio receiver in Saleem's head through which the midnight children communicate and, later, unblocked nasal passages equip Saleem with inordinate olfactory skills capable of tracing traitors and recognising the peculiar stench of injustice. Shiva, the body-swap victim, lays claims to the powers of his mythic ancestor and snaps bodies with his all-powerful knees, while the third leading child of the confederation, Parvati, is the witch who erases the visibility of phenomena. Until Saleem's nose is unblocked, the midnight children act as an anarchic yet valid democratic experiment, a true reflection—in comic terms—of the multitudinous resources of ideas and social formations available in India. Their emblematic role as a democracy is further enhanced during the crisis of the Emergency when, robbed of their powers, the midnight children do cohere as an inter-supportive unit. When the nurse, the Widow's Hand, who performs the sterilization informs Saleem that "Indians are only capable of worshipping one God" (438), Saleem tries to argue back with the three hundred and thirty million Hindu gods plus Allah. All is to no avail for Saleem learns from the Widow's Hand that those who would be gods fear no one so much as other potential deities; and that, that and that only, is why we, the magical children of midnight, were hatred feared destroyed by the Widow, who was not only Prime Minister of India but also aspired to be Devi, the Mother-goddess in
her most terrible aspect, possessor of the shakti of the gods, a multi-limbed divinity with a centre-parting and schizophrenic hair ... And that was how I learned my meaning in the crumbling palace of the bruised-breasted women .... We were are shall be the gods you never had (438).

At this point in the narrative there are a number of things happening. Firstly, the whole edifice of Saleem's fabrication and, thus, the infrastructure of his singular claim to meaning, collapses. The would-be "god" or magical child of midnight is brought to heel, in a metafictional sense, and the quasi-comical reason for his existence is lain bare. Saleem and the midnight's children have been invented to explain, in a ludicrous way, why Indira Gandhi called a state of emergency and carried out a forced sterilisation campaign. Viewed from another direction, the fictional joke reveals the extreme measures adopted by powerful people like Indira Gandhi to enforce their view of reality upon everyone else. At the same time, Rushdie suggests that people can be god-like or magical or hold belief systems of various kinds, on the condition that communities maintain their diversity and that tolerance is granted to neighbourly differences. Thus, the three hundred and thirty million gods plus Allah and the midnight's children are, for Rushdie, workable examples (though not the only ones) of possible human and supra-human collaboration. It is a form of experience that, definitionally, cannot be tied to rituals of reverence, sacrifice or obedience, sacred texts or beliefs about the afterlife. All of these phenomena may be manifest in the experience, in one way or another, but the basic requirement is to keep multiple options and incongruities available for the creation and maintenance of mysterious and uncertain hybrids.

Rushdie reinforces this message through a clownish subversion of the gravity of the midnight's children's lost hope. It is Shiva, now the Widow's military destruction agent, who claims the last laugh. He had fulfilled "the function of Shiva-lingam, of Shiva the procreator, so that at this very moment, in the boudoirs and hovels of the nation, a new generation of children, begotten by midnight's darkest
child, was being raised towards the future. Every Widow manages to forget something important” (441). Saleem's putative, and Parvati and Shiva's biological son, is the first among these offspring to intimate something of a transformative future through his utterance of a long-delayed first word. Here is how Saleem records the event: “Abba ... Father. He is calling me father. But no, he has not finished, there is strain on his face, and finally my son, who will have to be a magician to cope with the world I'm leaving him, completes his awesome first word: "...cadabba" (459). Saleem plays on the non-Indian cabbalistic word formula and concludes that the boy is over-reaching his life's station. However, with this miniature scene, Rushdie/Saleem reveals Aadam's thorough mongrelization for the boy's first word encompasses the Urdu paternal title, ancient cabbalistic knowledge and, for most readers, the popular world of Walt Disney's magic. The incongruous diversity of social systems, such as the midnight children represent, is herein paralleled in a single individual: the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm. This generation, Rushdie implies, is not to be drained of its potential: this generation is magically plural by nature. Without placing any boundaries on what form the supra-human might take other than its quintessential hybridity, Rushdie intimates that mysterious realms beyond the present human consciousness are possible though not yet known. He remains faithful, in other words, to the concomitant potentiality and doubt originating from the notion of māyās masking veil. And, just as the realms beyond are unknowable, so is the potential of the new child. Father Saleem's terminal disintegration in the final moments of the narrative might darken this affirmative moment, yet the brash, new and plural participant of the future lives on despite paternal fictions and fictionality. In order to explore other resistances to the (qualified) failure of Saleem's parody of Mrs Gandhi's ventures into "make-believe," we need to return to mythical and other beginnings in Kashmir.

Kashmiri happenings

Home of the gods and goddesses, Kashmir holds an extraordinary significance for storytellers like Rushdie. In his fable, Haroun and the Sea of Stories, Rushdie creates a source hole in the ocean's bed from which all the first stories
emerge. The idea probably arose from Shiva’s churning-the-ocean myth but the Himalayas’s mighty peaks, similarly, act as traditional and symbolic guardians of the origins of myth and the great epics of Hinduism. Moreover, Rushdie’s ancestors, like Saleem’s, originate from the province so it follows that Kashmir occupies a privileged place in the writer’s imagination. Kashmir, with its diverse populations of ancestors and divinities, acts as an esoteric parallel to the urban mongrelisations of Bombay and the complementary roles played by the two sites in the novel again demonstrates Rushdie’s proposition that art be a meeting of spiritual and material worlds. Given such auspicious attributes, it seems appropriate to look carefully at the narrative’s Kashmiri episodes for a significance that may counterbalance the artifice and subversions that we have seen in the Saleem-Indira structure.

Right from the beginning, Saleem’s performance narrative celebrates mixtures, stories endlessly regenerated in new combinations and refined philosophies dressed in the latest street talk. With straight-faced agitation, our clown sets up the comic parameters: “I must work fast, faster than Sheherazade,” he cries, “if I am to end up meaning—yes meaning—something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity” (9). At this point, the reader must make decisions about Saleem’s tone. Is he literally or ironically fearful of being absurd? Since Saleem’s storytelling manner verges on the absurd, an ironic reading assumes the upper hand. The reader/audience delights in Saleem’s mask of purposeful seriousness and in his listing of the enormous dangers involved in the tale he is about to tell. Beneath the preposterous chatter, however, there lurks an anxiety over his capacity to shape the announced multitudinous events and ideas into some form of workable and meaningful whole. Even more grave and threatening is his apprehension over the issue of identity since Saleem’s fear of absurdity is, simultaneously, a psychological truism and a metafictional joke. Saleem, thus, evinces a clown’s ambiguity and, in so doing, enacts Seigel’s notion of the abyss of human solitude beneath the humour. In a sense, the clown foresees his imminent quandary and, with righteous urgency, deflects his anxiety onto his grandfather. Shortly returned from Germany where he had discovered the “fact” “that India—like radium—had been ‘discovered’ by the Europeans” (11), grandfather Aziz experiences a loss of faith. Saleem does
not dwell on Aziz's discovery—as he does on the loss of faith—but the imperialist formulation of India represents a playful, Rushdean signpost which declares the author's intention to contest such views from an Indian perspective. "Discovered" India, in the context of plot, throws grandfather Aziz off his spiritual balance whereupon "he resolved never again to kiss the earth for any god or man. This decision, however, made a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history" (10). Therein, the "god-shaped hole" makes its first appearance.

Having established this vital conflict between an intellectual and a spiritual position, Saleem improvises and turns the incident into a running gag: "The tussock of earth," he corrects himself, "crucial though its presence was as it crouched under a chance wrinkle of the prayer-mat, was at bottom no more than a catalyst" (11). Next time round, the earth becomes decidedly pro-active: "the valley, gloved in a prayer-mat, punched him on the nose" (11). In the dramatically embroidered fourth version, the incidence receives its full significance: "Forward he bent, and the earth, prayer-mat-covered, curved up towards him. And now it was the tussock's time. At one and the same time a rebuke from Ilse-Oskar-Ingred-Heidelberg as well as valley-and-God, it smote him upon the point of the nose" (12). Thereby, grandfather Aziz, like his putative grandson-to-be, is "knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole" (12). The significant point, in the final re-inscription of the incident, is the shift from loss of faith to an inability "to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve," a shift to the middle or doubter's ground which is simultaneously described as a hole. The novel's position on spiritual concerns, ironically, is not as decisive as purported by Saleem's first announcement. Moreover, although Midnight's Children is duly renowned for its previews of narrative events to come and reviews of events past, the quick series of repeats found in the running gag on the prayer-mat-nose incident is a rarity in the narrative. Apart from provoking laughter, the effect underlines the significance of the incident, intimating that the book's fertile ground is none other than the in-between space where spiritual and material worlds meet and all forms of closure are denied.
Through the repetitious and exuberant romp, Rushdie introduces the idea that doubt, as is raised in the concept of *mâyâ*, is a positive attitude, one that will enhance the possibilities of the human spirit. Nonetheless, doubt is double-faced and its nether leanings towards nihilism can never be completely effaced. In the final analysis, clowns are left to contend with their fears of personal absurdity and life’s possible meaninglessness: paradoxically, in a world governed by certainty, there would be no clowns.

Aziz’s fall from Kashmir’s Edenic heights has been well documented as has the timeless quality of Tai the boatman. Indira Karamcheti, for example, describes how “the fairy tale of Snow White” is evoked within the Edenic Vale by three drops of blood that freeze upon the snow when the earth punches grandfather Aziz on the nose. Saleem himself makes a Qur’anic reference about the drops of blood and later three drops appear on the perforated sheet symbolising Naseem’s virginity. According to Karamcheti, Rushdie thus offers and rejects the hegemony of European myths to make room for his own: India’s genealogy, with its diversity and multiplicity, becomes the “magical, inclusive multiplicity of selves and origins.” Kashmir, the home of an inexhaustible pantheon of supra-human beings, is the site of beginnings and diversity where spiritual formations and the art of storytelling are inextricable. Tai the boatman exemplifies this fusion for, despite his flaws, he exhibits all the criteria of an archetypal storyteller (with no small likeness to Rushdie himself) who, like Vyasa and Valmiki of the epics, is well on the way to assuming a semi-divine status in people’s minds. He babbles in “magical talk, words pouring from him like fools money ... soaring up to the most remote Himalayas of the past, then swooping shrewdly on some present detail” (15). Tai, further, functions as the first of the book’s iconoclastic commentators:

Yara, you should’ve seen that Isa [Christ] when he came, beard down to his balls, bald as an egg on his head. He

was old and fagged-out but he knew his manners .... And what an appetite! ... I told him, eat, fill your hole, a man comes to Kashmir to enjoy life, or to end it, or both. His work was finished. He just came up here to live it up a little (16).

Food, Kashmiri food, lacking no mystical flavour, fills another man's hole caused not, in this case, by doubt but by a crucifix's nails or spikes. Almost blasphemous, this black comedy is not without a certain zest which recalls the traditional vidūṣaka's reliance on the most tangible of substances, food. The anecdote illustrates, once again, that Kashmir appeals to the many and varied appetites for food and the spirit.

Tai's anecdote also marks the beginning of Rushdie's play on the symbolism of "holes." The technique is not unlike the fluid doubling quality that pervades his characterizations and, apart from a characteristic comic assymetry, resembles Okri's and Farah's skills in constructing leitmotiv patterns. The "hole" symbol travels from Aziz to Isā across religious boundaries and then reappears in the perforated sheet through which Aziz falls, section by section, under the spell of Naseem, the "phantasm of a partitioned woman" (25). Formerly a gap or container in which a philosophical position of uncertainty is valued, the "hole" is now also a partial field of vision and the symbol of the grandparents' marriage. In this way, the "hole" gradually acquires diverse meanings which broaden through a pun to become the "whole," most significantly the whole of India, and, concurrently, the increasing lack of wholeness with respect to Saleem's disintegrating body. Lifāfa Das's peepshow box is a clever combination of the "hole" and the "whole". "See the whole world, come see everything!" is Lifafa's cry which, Saleem notes, preyed upon the showman's mind causing him to increase the postcards in the peepshow "as he tried, desperately, to deliver what he promised, to put everything into his box" (75). Later, Saleem describes the washing chest as a hole in which to escape from the torments of his young life. That particular hole proves to be the ignominious launching pad of his telepathic career. Finally, the shifting symbolic "hole" returns
to a mimicry of its dual origins in bodies and sheets: holes take over Saleem's body at the end of the narrative and Saleem's transformed sister, Jamila, sings the sacred songs of Pakistan through the three inch diameter hole in the "famous, all-concealing, white silk chadar" (313). This brief demonstration of Rushdie's shifting symbolism illustrates an alternative means of gathering meaning from his art. Dependent on a comic logic wherein disparate elements accumulate in unlikely correspondences, Rushdie's symbolic play on (w)holes feeds into the Kashmiri middle ground, into the hole that contains the whole of India, and affirms the value of pluralism.

**narrator Saleem and the contesting voices**

A dialogic interplay of voices provides another avenue through which Rushdie subverts notions of centrality and oneness. Variations in and alternatives to the narrator's voice sound like contradictions in terms but Saleem's storytelling control is not as total as he would have us believe. In the first place, Saleem presents himself as a magical, consciousness-penetrating child but the reader is soon aware that the narrative position is that of an adult Saleem with an unreliable memory. To recount the adventures of his life and that of the two generations preceding him, Saleem rolls time back and assumes, by turns, the role of an omniscient narrator and himself, transported back through time. Thereby, he observes and comments upon the main events of his grandparents' and his parents' lives. He adopts a child-like tone in some moments, virtually becomes enmeshed in the action at others, satirises, subverts and, even rhetorically transforms incidents, at other moments, into breathtaking mythic flights. The child's facile linkage of disparate events surfaces in comments made about the climax of courting through the perforated sheet. "On the day the World War ended, Naseem developed the longed-for headache. Such historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family's existence in the world" (27). One of the few heroes in Saleem's story is Mian Abdullah, the founder of a Muslim splinter group that opposed Ali Jinnah's Muslim League's uncompromising demands for partition. In Saleem's revision of events, Abdullah's assassination becomes a legend in which
defamiliarising symbolism cinematically dissolves into a blow-by-blow description of the attack, only to be deftly subverted by a brief allusion to Grass's Oskar and his object-splitting voice-box. The juxtaposition of horror and the ridiculous augments the deep sense of injustice provoked by the hero's demise which, above all else, signals the end of a viable opportunity to arrest the forces backing partition.

When Padma, Saleem's primary audience, critic, admirer and, most importantly, the Hindu complement to Saleem's Muslim heritage, enters the second chapter, the narrative mode alters. In the first place, Padma's status as a contemporary manifestation of the goddess again illustrates Rushdie's "habit of weaving mythological and religious themes into the body of his novels." Further, her presence reinforces the novel's structural similarities with the Arabian Nights and its central tale of conflict that is parasitic on countless other stories. However, since I have already posited the Saleem-Indira parallelism at the work's centre, this contradictory claim warrants qualification. The live, face-to-face relationship between Saleem and Padma acts as a bracketed plot dealing with the issue of centrality in alternative ways. Firstly, Saleem draws the less sophisticated "Dung Goddess" into the created world of his story and its vital relationship with Indian political affairs. Padma, in response, stubbornly demonstrates the centrality of their human interaction. Therefore, their repartees incorporate much burlesque play on the art of storytelling, sexuality and down-right commonsensical humanness. Additionally, as Stéphane Tyssens points out, Padma's example as audience-reader emancipates women and readers alike by demonstrating their crucial role in the creative process. Saleem may be able to distort any situation within māyā's illusory web but Padma, as gullible as she may be about some issues, firmly resists philosophical contamination. Most importantly, as the representative of the millions of women on the periphery of power in India, she equally rebuffs Saleem's endless play on doubt and Indira's delusions with a measure of down-to-earth certainty that


is wholesome, tolerant and loving. Padma, therein, challenges her author's forthright advocacy of uncertainty. Nothing, in the end, can be sacrosanct, not even an author. Ironically too, in swallowing many lives, Saleem's voice projects the conflicts and dreams of the heterogeneous masses who, together with Padma, contest Saleem's self-importance and narratorial control. Padma mocks both Saleem and Rushdie when she expresses her contradictory emotions about returning "to this man who will not love me and only does some foolish writery?" (193).

Devices like multivocality, that unexpectedly subvert authority or closure of any kind, exemplify Rushdie's ongoing play on Aziz's entrapment "in a strange middle ground ... between belief and disbelief" (12). The positional middle ground gives rise to a wide range of debate over such issues as historiography, textuality, tolerance, fictionality and so forth. The crucial feature, as Saleem's exposition on the meanings available from his surname illustrates, is Rushdie's gregarious quest for the plural form which, in this case, resonates with the myths of origins from various belief systems:

_Sinai_ contains Ibn Sina, master magician, Sufi adept, and also Sin the moon, the ancient god of Hadhramaut, with his own mode of connection, his powers of action-at-a-distance upon the tides of the world. But Sin is also the letter S, as sinuous as a snake; serpents lie coiled within the name. And there is also the accident of transliteration—Sinai, when in Roman script, though not in Nastaliq, is also the name of the place-of-revelation, of put-off-thy-shoes, of commandments and golden calves; but when all that is said and done ... it is the name of the desert—of barrenness, infertility, dust, the name of the end (304-5).

Names, with their cultural and spiritual conglomeration of meanings, operate as microcosms of the macrocosmic narrative. Whichever way the novel is approached,
whether through narration, names, structure, style or plot, the same advocacy of multiplicity, diversity and indeterminacy arises. Wherever and however the conglomerates are assembled and presented, spiritual references abound and, though it may seem too obvious to mention, the communication is unrelentingly comic. The name analysis, for example, is amusing because of an overload of incongruous meanings—in a name that, finally, is not even Saleem's.

**a near encounter with the spirit**

The single episode in Saleem's story, that engages directly—though ever ambivalently—with spiritual matters, occurs in the aftermath of a family crisis and its usual interconnectedness with conflicts plaguing the subcontinent. In the early seventies at the climax of the Pakistani war, bombs flatten Saleem's dispersed family. The catastrophe unleashes the family's silver spittoon which becomes, in Saleem's dramatised terms, "the past plummeting towards me ... to become what-purifies-and-sets-me-free ... because all the Saleems go pouring out of me ..." (343). With a blow from the heirloom, the human subject is erased, leaving in his wake a "mandog" object called the buddha—meaning both an old man and the One who found enlightenment in no-thing. The objectified buddha, "he," joins the Pakistani Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities. Together with three boysoldiers, "Farooq Shaheed Ayooba," the buddha submits to the commands of the West Pakistani army's ruthless program to eliminate their Muslim brothers in the East. Commentator Saleem slips the hood of amnesia over the atrocities, in which he is implicated, and quickly corrects Padma's incorrect use of the pronoun: "not I. He, he, the buddha ... the not-Saleem" (360). A question is thus raised: is the Saleem-buddha transformation due to amnesia or to an abrogation of responsibility? Characteristically, no complete or concrete answers arise for such questions, though the induced catatonic state provides both an apt metaphor for this ignominious chapter of Indo-Pakistan history as well as material for much grotesque humour which functions to augment the horror of the events. Saleem suggests, after a graphic reportage of the war crimes, that amnesia may be a cheap way out of a fictional dead-end though his narration, concurrently, implies that it
would be equally valid to view amnesia as psychological revulsion induced by abominations committed in the course of the civil wars. More constructively, amnesia provides fertile ground on which to examine a life stripped of memory, a life, in Rushdie's terms, that secedes from history and, consequently, from humanity.

The mindless buddha soon reacts against his degradation, described as an "overdose of reality," and looks forward to "flight into the safety of dreams" (360). Appropriately, the motley group find refuge in the delta of the sacred Ganges, in the Sundarbans' dense and monsoon-ridden wilderness that leaks with spiritual and chimerical forms. Tangible dreams torment the boy-soldiers with their own wrongdoings, encouraging them to take account of their actions, while uncertainties swell around them like vaulting mangrove roots. When a snake bites the buddha, Saleem's memory returns and our narrator, still keeping a distance between himself and his degenerate alter-ego, reports that the buddha "was reclaiming everything, all of it, all lost histories, all the myriad complex processes that go to make a man" (364-5). Buddha-Saleem and the boy soldiers journey on through the dense liquefied space, across a part-psychological and part-mystical threshold, towards their deepest desires. There, the jungle assaults them with its worst trick, the expenditure of dreams by way of sexual satiation with houris in the Kali temple. As in the relationship between Muslim Saleem and Hindu Padma, religions lose their boundaries and, like the environment, literally leak into one another. Paradise ultimately proves a fearsome place for imperfect humans. When their bodies manifest a translucency due to the expenditure of dreams, the jungle wayfarers take fright and flee from the wilderness's grasp, fearful of spiritual submission which, ironically, could have been an encounter with "eternal bliss." Though the flight proceeds with due comic haste back into the world of armies and dates, putrid crops and talking corpses, Rushdie allows the sepulchral wilderness to remain symbolic of a path not pursued to its end or, perhaps, to its revelation.

Saleem's final comment on the jungle of dreams, to which he had fled in the hope of peace, admits to finding "both less and more" (368). With few words, the episode's ambiguity, concerning the moral dilemmas of warfare and spiritual
commitment, is clearly stated. Moreover, the episode's two parts—the deadened amnesiac buddha and the pleasuring of Saleem and company—represent polarities of the liminal condition. One encapsulates a state which avoids moral responsibility, while the other intimates a cleansing ritual that is transcendent and terrifying. Together, in Rushdie's revisionary storytelling, the two parts recall the moral and spiritual quandaries addressed in the Hindu epics except that Rushdie's message of inclusivity and paradox, characteristically, resists final solutions. In other words, where the epics invariably conclude with the hero or heroine's acceptance of the Hindu ritual of self renunciation in which the ego expands into the all-embracing consciousness, Rushdie's text avoids the price of self-loss and encompasses, instead, an openness that is figuratively crowded with possibilities. In a final ironic twist, escape, for the boys, means death from three buzzing bullets in the warring world of men. If the enigmatic jungle of the spirit consumed their dreams, that strange spirit also redeemed their war-scarred souls in readiness for the next world. The Sundarbans' mythical symbolism and spiritual enigmas strengthen the novel's multicultural roots and support its thesis of the simultaneous affirmation of and resistance to supra-human possibility.

**symbolic mixtures for a clown**

As Saleem pursues his ridiculous quest for centrality, his fabrications lead him, unintentionally, deeper and deeper into expressions of multiplicity and mixtures. Consequently, when the idea fails, as it must, the reader is already aware of the value of the "teeming" possibilities that are figuratively found in and issuing from Aziz's "god-shaped hole." Viewed in terms of a clown's performance, two figures could be said to be operative: the Saleem of metafictional artifice, who improvises on a single idea of centrality, and Saleem the storyteller or *vidhyaka* or Ganesh scribe, who generates ideas of diversity, multiplicity and mixtures. The two structural aspects of Saleem form an interactive and interdependent unit such that when the artifice of the former collapses, a subdued yet multifarious clown remains to recount the final chapter in which storytelling time converges with the fictional present. That this final episode concerns the art of storytelling will be of no surprise
itself: its outrageous aspect lies in the fact that the narrative subject or storytelling practice is stirred into thirty-one pickle jars. Our storyteller leads a double life in which he masters "the multiple gifts of cookery and language": "by day amongst the pickle vats, by night with these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of clocks" (38). His early admission of this double life is brief and unelaborated and, though referenced time after time in the following four hundred pages, only achieves its full significance in the novel's closing moments. With the rise and fall of his family's absurd bid for meaning behind him, Saleem eulogises on "the feasibility of the chutnification of history: the grand hope of the pickling of time," but he simply pickles chapters (459). Immortality, he confesses, exacts a price of imperfection and distortion from the writing-pickling duo: "The art is to change the flavour in degree, but not in kind; and above all (in my thirty jars and a jar) to give it shape and form----that is to say, meaning (I have mentioned my fear of absurdity)" (461). He applies the expertise of Mary (baby-swapper, ayah and Mrs Braganza of Braganza Pickles), his mother, Padma and even his soured spinster aunt and stirs a spectrum of emotions--disappointment, jealousy, guilt and love--into the chapter chutneys: they will be "too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth ... that they are, despite everything, acts of love" (461). What Saleem fails to point out, but what remains patently obvious, is that pickling is the mixing of unlike ingredients: the fruit and vinegar combination is, therefore, genuine Bombay sustenance and a tangible example of the potential of hybridization. Taking his birth in the Narlikar nursing home as the point of departure, Saleem's journey as a clown persona completes the circle back to his boyhood Bombay where, with Mary and Padma's help, he pickles, in jar and page, a moral and entertaining lesson for his son Adaam. Is this simply a novel form of oral storytelling through which each generation transmits their stories on to the next, or do the pickles involve another level of meaning?

Since Midnight's Children is a clowning narrative, there inevitably remains the possibility of an unexpected punch-line hiding behind māyā's veil. Saleem's
dedication to pickling his life and times makes a direct, if a rather more sophisticated connection with the vidīṣaka's infamous preoccupation with food, and chutnification, by a happy coincidence, proves to be the right and proper business for a comic figure with an overgrown and highly sensitive proboscis. While both suggestions pertain, are they ludicrous enough to be the final comic ploy in a text that is a veritable compendium of mirthful subversions? In order to discover a final unexpected stratagem in the narrative, we need to return to one of those invaluable "source" books or origins, Bharata's Nāṭyasāstra, the seminal Indian text on the theatrical arts. Seigel explains that Bharata's theory played

upon the literal meaning of rasa, "flavor" or "taste," [and] used the gastronomic metaphor to explain the dynamics of the aesthetic experiences. Just as the basic ingredient in a dish, when seasoned with secondary ingredients and spices, yields a particular flavor which the gourmet can savor with pleasure, so the basic emotion in a play, story, or poem, when seasoned with secondary emotions, rhetorical spices, verbal herbs, and tropological condiments, yields a sentiment which the connoisseur can appreciate in enjoyment ... The human emotion of mirth is enhanced into the corresponding rasa of comedy.37

Note here, that although this source is an "art" text without mention, in Seigel's summary, of spiritual contexts, Bharata's explanation for rasa belongs to an age when art was naturally tied to religion as a devotional and potentially sublime religious practice. Eliot Deutsch's list of the various meanings which have been attributed to rasa across the centuries illustrates this point: "Sap, juice, water, liquor, milk, nectar, poison, mercury, taste, savor, prime or finest part of anything, flavor, relish, love, desire, beauty. The meanings range from the alcoholic ... soma juice

37 Seigel, 7-8.
to the Metaphysical Absolute--the Brahman. Apart from its literal translation as flavour, the three dominant semantic clusters that constitute rasa's meanings seem to be fluidity, relish and the "Metaphysical Absolute" which together create a suggestive and suitably enigmatic mixture for a Rushdean source. In this light, Saleem's pickling can be seen to re-engage and parody the ancient aesthetic analysis and, at once, mix old and new narratives into a lively and pungent art. He appropriates not just an ancient text but that text's whole imaginative realm in which the supra-human is a natural aspect of the topography. The ancient comic flavour with its implicit supra-human contexts duly spices Saleem's storytelling pickles and, at once, rasa's range of meanings reinforces Rushdie's agile engagement with plurality and the productive potential of uncertainty. The transcendental comic art, which Bharata aimed to explain, is mixed along with a host of other ingredients into the preserving process of Saleem's pickles.

Chutnified in the spice of satire, the central idea, pivotal on Indira Gandhi's absurd bid for deification, achieves its just end. But what of the fictional imposter, the clown Saleem? The book's constant leakage of lives across boundaries finally takes a uni-directional turn, draining the disillusioned narrator of his bodily being, or so he tells us. Since even the clear-sighted Padma cannot see the cracks pervading Saleem's body, the question of dissimulation remains ambiguous. Perhaps it is the fictional idea of Saleem bound to Indira that fails whereas the man at the periphery lives on. Alternatively, his disintegration appears to be the final manifestation of the Sundarbans' translucency and Parvati's invisibility trick that made possible Saleem's illegal return to India after the war. In this novel of Kashmiri origins, these cross-references point to the Hindu and Sufi notions of release. Unwillingly and in contrast to his behaviour in the Sundarbans, Saleem relinquishes his grip on his self-image in a movement that is not dissimilar to Raju's collapse into another state of consciousness. Syed raises another possibility when he refers to the resemblance between Saleem's bodily degeneration and the mythological theme

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of dismemberment and regeneration: the cracks in Saleem's body "figuratively evoke the dismemberment of Purusha, the Cosmic Person, in the ancient Vedic sacrifice in which the very dismemberment leads to life and not its end." Then again, is Saleem's clown role obsolete once the stories are committed to the pickled page? Or is Saleem's disintegration-fragmentation, Rushdie's final gesture to Saleem and his own underlying fears of absurdity and human solitude? Disintegrating or otherwise, the clown rushes on into his outlandish vision, informing us that "cracking now, fission of Saleem, I am the bomb in Bombay, watch me explode, bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd ... because I have been so-many too-many persons" (463). Synthesised or jostling one against the other, the diverse interpretations concerning Saleem's fate, metaphorically fill the openness in which Rushdie leaves the narrative because, finally, everything is sucked "into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes" (463).

Saleem the clown is positively predisposed to mixtures; to Kashmir's limitless pantheon; to the Sundarbans' profusion of dangerous if mystical dreams; and to Bombay's emotionally-driven pickles. This given, he also argues himself into the void and, at once, delays the moment of the void's inevitable coming. As such, he is the true doubtful and absurd, putative grandson of the man with the "god-shaped hole," caught with the contradiction of belief and disbelief. The burden proves too much for grandfather Aziz who takes revenge on the God that eventually re-appears to orchestrate his son's death. Saleem's hole, by contrast, opens to the hypothesis that the whole potential of experience can be realised, even if that position is subject to a relativism that may end in meaninglessness. Over and above any pessimistic resonances generated by Saleem's disintegration, the journey from a "god-shaped hole" to pickles creates something to celebrate, the novel of Midnight's Children. The novel's clowning spirit provides Rushdie with the means to describe the initial failure of Indian independence and, at the same time, to affirm the tolerance of Indian-ness, a spiritual truth learned from his childhood Bombay. As the comic tales unfold, Rushdie's concomitant affirmation of and

39 Syed, 103.
resistance to all possibilities intimates that an unnamable supra-human phenomena, descended from many far, yet, cherished origins, is a viable option for those who wish to resist the divisive patterns of sectarianism and the emptiness of a soul-less way of being.

The soul travels by means other than the intellect, which is the reason why Rushdie and his Midnight's Children are so important to this study. Laughter, too, conveys a sense of supra-human-ness or a feeling that transports one to some place other than the material, fact-contained, world. In the tradition of rasa, it is said that when the comic rasa is fully tasted, one "tastes" the absolute, brahman: "The comic mood then, despite its own perverse resistance to the sublime, despite its intractable profanity, could be considered incongruously and ironically sacred through the dynamics of rasa. This irony is itself a comic one." Described alternatively, comic art, through valuing laughter more than the seriousness of failure, pain and all the myriad of other woes connected with human existence, affects a healing and transcendence of the spirit or soul. I am not referring to a growing recognition of laughter's contribution to medical healing techniques, though such findings are naturally part of the complex functions and experience of laughter; nor am I proposing that the form of transcendence available through laughter equals the sustained religious fervour that rituals provoke. Laughter is fundamentally ephemeral, initiating an inexplicable state in which the spirit leaps to where one cannot name nor remain. Perhaps the most profound mystery of our mostly peripheral and insignificant lives, laughter may very well be, as Rushdie seems to suggest throughout Midnight's Children, a truly "god-shaped hole," for mirth is a paradoxical means with which to defend ourselves against a sense of loss or meaninglessness. Therefore, the novel's clowning dynamics cannot be disengaged from the narrative's serious intentions for Rushdie works, assiduously like Saleem's mother, to transform the overwhelming disaster and pain of India into moments of his readers' laughter. Social realists may condemn comic artists for an inability to face the facts of the cruel and exploitative societies in which we live but I believe

40 Seigel 50-1
that laughter shoulders the bleak prospects and transports its anxieties onto another plane of being. In so doing, strong negative emotions like anger, helplessness and pain are, to a certain degree, relieved or healed.

My clowning interpretation is but one response to the multitudinous possibilities that lie within Rushdie's text of India, an Indian text of tolerance. Knowledge of the spirit, as I have argued throughout this study, is provisional, fluid, perplexing, something which we continually reinvent or alter, discard or embrace. As one means of connecting with the spirit, laughter is a form of knowledge quite alien to our normal avenues for exploring what it means to be a human body and mind in a cosmos. The neglect of laughter as a form of knowledge most probably derives from the fact that laughter is so commonplace and seemingly effortless, a misconception that a comic artist would quickly contest. A corollary of such neglect is the under-valuation of the humorous content in a work of comic art. We need to explore more fully the reasons why some artists choose to transmit textual information through the medium of humour. If humour is superfluous to the central textual messages, then, why use the comic form? My tentative answer, for writers like Rushdie, is that humour nurtures the human spirit.

Consequently, the supra-human influence and presence in *Midnight's Children* is two-fold: in an intellectual sense, Rushdie maintains his links with origins and maps out a middle ground of affirmation and resistance to supra-humanness; and, in another thoroughly comic sense, Rushdie's clowning narrative sustains the spirit through its moment-to-moment soul-like quest for laughter. The map of the former slips, by way of a comic metaphor, into the sign of the hyphen, while the latter remains in the text, awaiting the next reading and another performance. Padma's term for Saleem's preoccupation, "writery," highlights the clownish aspects of Rushdie's ongoing improvisation on the theme of an hybridity, born in the child of Bombay and linked to the marvellous and multiple signs of Kashmiri gods and storytellers. If Saleem's exit from *Midnight's Children's* performance is haunted by a sense of despair over the loss of the creative tolerance of Indian-ness, he leaves behind his author's supra-human hyphens as significations
of the bounty found in the transcendent comic art of mixtures.
CONCLUSION: BEYOND SURFACES
CONCLUSION: BEYOND SURFACES

One unforeseen factor that has emerged from this study of supra-human phenomena in the selected novels of R.K. Narayan, Nuruddin Farah, Bessie Head, Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie is the analytical role played by the Hindu concept of māya. For Narayan and Rushdie some sort of relationship with māya is to be expected and the concept may, as previously mentioned, even predispose Indian artists to create works of comic irony. According to Seigel, the comic spirit is embedded in Indian consciousness:

The phenomenal world was frequently described by Indian philosophers as comic trickery: empirical reality is māya, a hoax, a joke, a deceit wherein a rope is mistaken for a snake. Seeing through the great metaphysical flimflam and epistemological bamboozlement, getting the ultimate joke then, might be liberation.¹

However, while humorists divert audiences with the concept's deceptive characteristics, māya also functions as an epistemological puzzle that has profound implications for supra-human hypotheses because the concept of māya is predominantly concerned with the limits and defects of human perception. Māya is the surface which shields the supra-human deities and spirits, unified consciousness or God from view; it is the sophistry, in fact, that establishes supra-human presence. If the deceptive surface of "reality" is removed or perforated in some way, then human perception would be able to apprehend the "true reality" of the supra-human entity.

According to apophatic notions, the supra-human entity is quintessentially indescribable and unimaginable because the phenomenon is an Absolute Being that is "wholly Other" than our experience of human being-ness. Māya, on the

contrary, is a marker of the limits of human vision in systems of thought that do not delimit supra-human elements within human being-ness. Hinduism contends that the *Brahman* is within us, but we simply cannot recognise the phenomenon for what it is. Except for differences in initial premises, the argument corresponds with Lyotard's notion of our inability to extricate ourselves from the stories that we tell about the world. Lyotard's conclusion is that everything is thus subjective and relative, whereas Hinduism would say that *Brahman* is everything and therefore human beings are *Brahman* also. In other words, the concept of *māyā* applies to a pantheistic system of belief wherein "everything is God." Pantheistic philosophy can either be "cosmic (world-affirming), equating God with nature, [or] acosmic (world-denying), holding sense-experience to be illusory and only the divine to be real." Hinduism follows an "acosmic" pattern, while "cosmic pantheism" underpins African cosmologies, like those of the Yoruba and the Sotho-Tswana, and the schismatic mysticism derived from monotheist parent bodies. The mystic groups that are pertinent to this thesis include the offshoot Muslim sects of Sufism, found throughout the Middle East and India, and the equivalent Cult of Saints that are a feature of Islamic cultures of North Africa.

Farah's Deeriye, for example, is a pious orthodox Muslim except that he holds unshakeable faith in his visions of the saintly Nadiifa. Although Farah gives no indication in *Close Sesame* that the world of nature partakes of the Godhead, pantheistic tendencies are discernible in his treatment of visions and in the novel's proposal that human life is of God but is only a partial realisation of God's full potential which the devout will achieve in the next life. Thus, while appearing to conform to conservative Islam, *Close Sesame's* religious views are more closely aligned with mystical Islamic beliefs, similar to those espoused by groups of the Cult of Saints. Rushdie, the other writer of Muslim descent, dismisses orthodoxy categorically as dogma and, instead, employs ideas of supra-human possibilities


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from what could be called a syncretisation of some aspects of Sufism and Hinduism. His plural vision, which would accept all propositions about the relationship between the human and the supra-human, can be viewed analytically as a proposal in which "there is naught but mayā." While multiple options are kept open, mayā's association with doubt provides Rushdie with a safety net to guard against the formation of absolute statements about the nature of the human experience in supra-human contexts. Rushdie, therefore, neither adopts not dismisses a pantheistic stance, so it is interesting that, on the rare occasions that he turns his focus away from the preferred urban environment and engages with the landscapes of Kashmir and the Sundarbans, he does so in cosmic pantheistic terms. Does this reveal some unconscious connection made with the places that lie at the head and the foot of the holy Ganges? Or are the Himalayan hinterlands and the dense jungles of the delta unimaginable except in spiritual terms? Though Rushdie's position viz a viz pantheism is muted and fluctuating, his secular grounding is, by definition, more consistent with interactive notions of supra-humanness than with the schools of thought that posit the remoteness of the Absolute or "wholly Other."

Given that Narayan, Head and Okri work within religious environments in which pantheistic modes of thought are the status quo, the point is that, in using the concept of mayā as an analytical springboard, all the novels of this thesis would seem to exhibit pantheistic tendencies. Their philosophical groundings are thus quite different from metaphysical explorations of God as the "wholly Other" which have influenced much European philosophy and scholarship in the twentieth century. Strands of pantheistic thinking do carry over from the romantic movement but, by and large, philosophers of the modern eras, in response to the spread of scientific positivism, tend to conceptualise God as a remote and transcendental Being. At the same time, there are signs that some postmodern positions are open to approaches which reflect pantheist tendencies of one form or another. In his introduction to Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art, David Griffin observes that, in postmodern spirituality, the "reality of spiritual energy is affirmed, but it is felt to exist within and between all nodes in the cosmic web of interconnection. It is thus dispersed throughout the
universe, not concentrated in a source wholly transcendental to it. Similar notions are common to the spiritual fringes of the environmental movements that have emerged in response to threats of global warming and to the deterioration of wilderness areas around the planet. Perhaps a paradigm shift in western philosophical thought is in progress?

I also raise both the issue of māyā and its relationship with pantheism because the five writers under discussion are all concerned with the limits of human perception and, at the same time, with the means to transcend such limits by way of some form of altered consciousness. The concept of māyā presupposes that there are states of consciousness, such as dreams, yogic meditations and trance states, that can penetrate the perceptual shield. Raju, the incongruous holy man, sheds the veneer of human limitation when he relinquishes himself to fasting and prayer for the welfare of the villagers. From that moment till his death, Raju exists in a liminal threshold in which he is, to some degree, god-like. However, Narayan skilfully counteracts the transformation with the pathetic aspects of Raju's appearance as he sags down onto the river-bed. As the narrator has withdrawn from Raju's consciousness, we are prevented from seeing the event from his presumed god-like perceptual ability and are reliant, instead, on the surface mask of māyā. Narayan can thus conclude Raju's series of impromptu performances with an ironic twist, implying that the attribute of holiness is unknowable from external appearances. Only Raju has access to such knowledge through his own acts of holiness. In this regard, Raju's final words are illuminating since their simplicity conveys complex messages: "Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs--" (220). Primarily, the words indicate the imminent end of the drought and, through Narayan's punctuation, Raju's release into the next life. In the context of māyā, these words also offer a brief glimpse into Raju's altered state of consciousness insofar as his observations suggest that he sees further than normal (the rain in the hills) and feels something which the rest of the crowd cannot see (the water rising up his legs). Read in this way, Narayan implies that Raju has in

fact passed through the obscuring veil of *māṇya*.

In *Close Sesame*, the revelation triggered by Deeriye's asthmatic lungs changes Deeriye's perception of his troubled soul and signals his imminent transition from the partial sanctity of human experience to the complete sanctity of his union with Allah and Nadiifa in the next world. The novel addresses the limits of perception and communication directly, working as Farah does within the premise that humanity's partial sanctity, as well as prefiguring a sacred whole, implies that there are limits to the extent of knowledge that is available in this world. Again, the reader knows nothing of Deeriye's thoughts and feelings at the time of his death, though Farah implies that the event involves the madness of the implicated Khalifa and Deeriye's joy at the thought of reunion with Nadiifa and his God. These hints of Deeriye's bearing suggest that the old man passes through some form of ritualised rite of passage in a heightened state of consciousness until the moment of his death. As in Raju's case, the external view of the failed assassination attempt belies the incident's spiritual contexts and transformations. Though *māṇya* plays no direct role in this thoroughly Islamic novel, ideas of masking total perception and knowledge are fundamental to narrative meaning. It is worth noting that Farah obtained his undergraduate degree at Chandigarh in India which would lead one to assume that he has more than a superficial knowledge of Hindu philosophy.

Head, similarly, is not unfamiliar with the ideas of Hinduism though, as discussed, her primary interest lies in the notion of reincarnation which enables her to conceive an ongoing connection with her mother and other symbolic figures who pursue "things of the soul". Elizabeth's only reference to *māṇya* is made when she realises that the external appearances of Medusa are illusory: "Hadn't they a name for her in India--Mahamaya the Weaver of illusions, the kind that trapped men in their own passion?" (93). In terms of the relationship with altered states of consciousness, Elizabeth's experience inverts Raju's and Deeriye's passage through a transitory liminal state to supra-human realms. In Elizabeth's case, supra-human powers break through a *māṇya*-like curtain in order to enter her consciousness and test the toughness of her soul. Moreover, *A Question of Power* is primarily about
the human capacity and incapacity to contain his or her supra-human powers. Hierarchies produce abusive behaviour in dictators and gods alike. In order to counteract this tendency of absolute gods to oppress their subjects, Elizabeth locates the "magical," not the ruling aspects, of supra-human powers in the ordinary hearts of Africa's dispossessed peoples. Head presumes that the poor possess the same sort of moral fortitude which Elizabeth displays in her stand against her tormentors and that this innate sense of moral justice empowers them to withstand temptations of superiority in relation to others.

Okri's Madame Koto and her rise to the role of a fanatical oppressor shows that, on the contrary, poverty is not a natural protection against potential abuses of power. The bar owner's genuine efforts to extricate herself from the abject conditions of ghetto life spiral out of control and lead Madame Koto to commit wilful acts of destruction. On the other hand, the alternating cycles of equilibrium and chaos that are culturally encoded in the Yoruba's pantheistic worldview suggest that the pattern is, to some extent, unavoidable. Okri implies that the constant effort required of individuals and the community in order to attain the culture's idealised state of balance between the regenerative and the destructive forces is natural to the experience of life. A sense of fatalism within the community may follow from such ideas but, more significantly in Okri's terms, the unremitting struggle is capable of generating the commitment necessary to transform society and, subsequently, the contexts of that struggle. In consciously foregrounding heightened forms of consciousness, Okri employs the language and imagery of Nigerian worldviews. His message, however, is that the long-tried and trusted shaman-like forms of knowledge and healing are modes of interacting with the cosmos which should not be forgotten in the age of global modernisation. Spirits and ghosts may not materialise from the process, but through heightened forms of consciousness an individual may tap into the cosmic forces and perceive that, beyond the alienating and divisive circumstances of the present, there lies the pantheistic network of a unified cosmos. The abiku novels describe both liminal states that are entered by dreamers and possession states through which the supra-human forces intervene into human consciousness and affairs.
The fact that Okri is the only one of the selected writers who has no direct connection with Hindu ideas prompts me to suggest that a conceptual similarity found within Yoruba and Hindu worldviews may be attributable to a geographical and historical relatedness between Africa and India. Whether that relatedness is due to the archaeological hypothesis that the human species arose from Africa or to the centuries of exchange and trade that occurred between the neighbouring communities across the seas is a matter of speculation beyond this thesis. What I find significant, however, is that literary scholarship could possibly benefit from comparative research into African and Indian narratives, be they oral or written, ancient or contemporary, in the contexts of conceptual notions such as pantheism. From a literary point of view, studies of related conceptual systems could lead to further insights into the imaginative processes that influence the diversity of ideas expressed in cultural variation. Conversely, the multitude of expressions which emerge from the same idea could imply that concepts like pantheism are somehow fundamental to human thought about the nature of the world. Moreover, these sorts of connections may counteract the more conspicuous influence that British and other European imperialism has exerted on African and Indian thought. Instead of the controlling frame of European colonisation, why not consider a cultural relatedness between Africa and India, one, furthermore, that is based on exchange rather than on subordination?

Finally, I would like to consider what, if anything, these novels might tell us about the future of supra-humanness in narratives emerging from postcolonial contexts. There appear to be two directions arising in literature devoted partially or wholly to the affairs of the spirit: one trend (represented by Narayan, Farah, Head and Okri) seeks to bring traditional concepts into contemporary settings with a strong emphasis on the spiritual nature of human interaction with the world and another trend (Rushdie) attempts to discover a new sense of spirituality in the human make-up that may be able to transcend ethnic divisions and religious intolerance characteristic of postcolonial history. Since the novels are chosen, apart from Midnight's Children, expressly for their supra-human subject matter, the weighting given to the two trends is an artificial thing and is not meant to be
indicative of relations with supra-human concerns in a wider survey of African and Indian literature. That aside, I believe my conclusions to be valid in a general sense.

The symbols of fragmentation and reconstruction found in Head's signature myth of Osiris provide a general framework for the first trend and act, at the same time, as sounding boards for these novels' relationship with postmodernism. In the introduction, I proposed that my interpretation of the term "postcolonial" covers the mass of alternative writing that exposes, in a plurality of voices, the colonisers' limited command of meanings. The writers achieve this exposure by incorporating local concepts and myths of origins within their contemporary stories about their worlds. In other words, they employ epistemological frames which differ markedly from the Christian and/or scientific frames in which most European literature is grounded. Moreover, since the narratives emerge in the decades of post-independence, they are primarily concerned, not with the fragmentation of meaning and identity that pervades the postmodern condition in western contexts, but with opposite tendencies which strive to unify the cosmos and reconstruct meaning and identity in visions of a pantheistic nature. The four writers pursue, in a variety of genres and personalised approaches, a holistic cosmos in which each part contributes to and is integral to the whole. Each artist may be culturally predisposed to view phenomena in this way, but the point is that the socio-political conditions of the postcolonial era make identity formation an imperative for the individual, the society and the nation.

Okonda Okolo, in discussing the problems which beset the discipline of philosophy in African environments, arrives at a conclusion similar to the artists' position on regenerating the past to enhance the possibilities of the future. He advises the present generation of scholars neither to ignore the traditional orientation of "ethnophilosophy" nor to reject out of hand the concepts of the discipline along European lines. Instead, Okolo proposes a hermeneutical approach which takes account of the ways in which the "cultural memory is ceaselessly renewed retroactively by new discoveries. Our past, by continually modifying itself through our discoveries, invites us to new appropriations; these appropriations lead
us to a better grasp of identity."\(^5\) A search for identity is the key theme and motivation for these artists and scholars who are less familiar with colonialism itself than with the insidious marks which the centuries of mental and physical slavery have left on Indian as well as on African psyches. But how can those visions withstand the cynicism of the economically powerful materialists who increasingly control global affairs? Do these writers speak from a third-world backwardness or from prophetic intuition? The answer has to be subjective since responses are predicated on whether values lie with material well-being or with the health of the spirit. The two areas of human affairs need not be mutually exclusive but, in the competitive, consumer-driven ethics of a climate of material rationalism, there is little room for spiritual matters. This is, perhaps, where Rushdie's approach may, ironically, be more fruitful, at least in an intermediary sense.

Rushdie, the single exponent of the strategy to discover a new form of spirituality in the human psyche, is a resolutely secular man whose narratives suggest that ambiguity is the key to a different understanding of the spirit. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie adopts a clown persona as his storyteller which allows him to experiment with the expression of spiritual ambiguity in various ways. In the first sense, the clown Saleem is able to provoke the reader's laughter while he criticises the fraudulent nature of his subject, Indian independence: the resultant laughter moderates Saleem's exposure of post-independence atrocities, not in order to excuse the behaviour but to raise the reader's awareness of the ways in which we are all implicated in the negative aspects of human experience. Secondly, Rushdie undercuts the stature of present religious systems by demonstrating how people manipulate the system's symbols for their own ends: Indira Gandhi appropriates Devi for her self-aggrandisement; Jesus is given the blue skin of Krishna to simplify conversion amongst the locals; and legendary views of Indian tolerance are destroyed by people who hold notions of religious purity. At the same time, Rushdie does not debunk the traditions in themselves but, contrarily, he retrieves

the source stories, ideas and symbols of Hinduism and Sufism and incorporates them into this new tale of an emerging spirit. Lastly, and perhaps most profoundly, the ambiguous spirit arises from the impulse, on the part of the creator, to make his art a clowning performance. Ultimately, the humour of Saleem's inverted art of snakes and ladders may offer "some sort of replacement for what the love of god offers in the world of faith." As I pointed out in "The Supra-human Hyphen," a clown creator treads a tenuous path between an affirmation and a denunciation of life, between visions of transcendence and artifice, between belief and disbelief in a purposeful and meaningful cosmos.

The ambiguity that is central to the art of clowning is also, in many ways, the base-line of postmodern thought. Margaret Rose's study of the genre of parody suggests that the postmodern era is conducive to writers who recognise the dilemmas of the late twentieth century and refuse to succumb to its seriousness. Thus, criticism together with self-mockery make the art of parody, in Rose's terms, "double-coded." She points to David Lodge's observation on the genre in which he notes that parody introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique of the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly too contradictory and heteroglot to be fitted into a high and straightforward genre.

Just as parody is "too contradictory and heteroglot" to be regarded as a "high" form of art, Rushdie's expansive and, simultaneously, mistrustful angle on spiritual concerns can never fit into established religious orthodoxies for he consciously


strives for a "religious mentality" that may be able to survive "outside of religious dogma and hierarchy."8

While the parodic aspects of Rushdie's comic art are consistent with the contradictions and anomalies of an electronic age of information systems and virtual reality, the spiritual position that he proposes is difficult to sustain. In a sense, his advocacy of multiple, plural and contradictory entities and ideas gives the individual, at once, too much freedom and too much doubt. The normal demands of life, be it in modern cities or traditional villages, seem to be unable to accommodate the degree of tolerance and doubt required by Rushdie's middle ground. He acknowledges the inherent difficulties of his position and admits that, nonetheless, he must cling to "that chameleon, that chimera, that shape-shifter, my own soul; must hold on to its mischievous, iconoclastic, out-of-step clown-instincts, no matter how great the storm."9 While the intellectual requirements of Rushdie's approach may not be useful in practical terms, his clowning can relieve some of the pain brought about by the twentieth century's view of humankind as having failed the humanist ideal. As the age-old commentator on human frailty, the clown has yet to be superseded in his capacity to relieve human anxiety and to further human desires for supra-human guidance. Peter Berger argues that in detecting a "discrepancy between man and the universe ... The comic reflects the imprisonment of the human spirit in this world ... By laughing at the imprisonment of the human spirit, humour implies that this imprisonment is not final but will be overcome."10 The clown is not a prophet and his healing powers are minimal and transitory, but he is a zealous guardian of social morality. Indeed, the ethical elements in a clown's zany and preposterous acts may function as a form of resistance on the part of the human spirit until new meanings for the contemporary world emerge from the

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8 Rushdie, "Is Nothing Sacred?" 103.


archaic messages and symbolic origins of humanity's long search for supra-human relations.

The storytellers who revive and reinvigorate the source stories and their concomitant cultural concepts, the shamans who mediate the supra-human forces in order to redress human misfortune and quell social anxieties, and the clowns who sustain the moral ground when spiritual momentum is at a low ebb all contribute to a restored trust in the purposeful creation of an integrated cosmos. According to Narayan, Farah, Head, Okri and Rushdie, there is time yet for humankind to live with the mysterious and unpredictable attributes of supra-humanness. In their respect for a measure of inexplicability in human relations with the supra-human, they have something in common with recent scientific theorists who suggest that unexplained mysteries are inevitable components in human knowledge of the workings of the universe. At the same time, these fiction writers suggest that the limits to human knowledge need to be constantly re-negotiated through avenues which challenge, in death and in life, māya's deceptive surfaces for the benefit of the many and varied living communities of this earth. Mystery and knowledge remain indissolubly linked for there will always be something hidden beyond the reassuring, though possibly deceptive, surfaces of our world.
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