

Relationality and the Transnational Indian Family in Shauna Singh Baldwin's "Nothing Must Spoil This Visit"

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The acceleration of migratory flows in the second half of the twentieth century has resulted in the formation of increasingly hybrid multiracial and multicultural societies in Europe and in North America. Avtar Brah's redefinition of such societies as "diaspora spaces" now constitutes a classic reminder that migration affects not only immigrants themselves but also those who are perceived as "natives" of these host societies. "Diaspora spaces" involve great numbers of people to the extent that they "includ[e] the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put;'" they are presented by Brah as sites of disjuncture and interaction, and as sites of ongoing identity negotiations, as sites of multi-faceted border-crossings where "boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested" (Brah 209).

From the late 1990s onwards, however, a wide range of scholars and writers have challenged the assumption that the multiplication of spaces of mixing and interaction between migrants and those who are constructed and represented as "natives" of the host society (by virtue of their cultural affiliations, their racial belonging and their mastering of the language of the "diaspora space" among other things), automatically engenders the rethinking of one's identity along de-essentialized, plural lines. Neither is it clear that these multiple identity shifts contest the fixed positions of otherness that structure categories of oppression and privilege for "natives" or migrants alike. Indeed, what is often obscured by those who see in the transnational tendencies of the contemporary world an occasion for creating more border-crossings, more plurality, more confrontations and interaction, is the potential for power asymmetry resulting from the intersection of various determinants of identity such as race, ethnicity, class, gender and national belonging. Such power asymmetry implies that the encounter with otherness, be it the otherness of the "native" or the otherness of the migrant, is always-already framed by broader relations of power and antagonism, which are often far from being acknowledged as such. The urgency of working out how one's identity is positioned along contradictory yet simultaneous axes of power and powerlessness constitutes a key issue in Ambreen Hai's text, "Departures from Karachi Airport." In this text, Hai comes to realize after a particularly harassing experience of border-crossing in Pakistan

on her way back to the U.S. that “[s]exism’ and ‘racism’ are easy labels ultimately inadequate for the more complicated power dynamics that we must in fact learn to decode” (Hai 156), and more generally, that “we are always enmeshed in the conflicting dynamics of different lines of power that constitute our identities not only in the terms in which *we* perceive ourselves, but also in the terms in which *others* perceive us” (Hai 156, emphasis in the original).

Agreeing with Brah on the necessity to move beyond the traditional association of “home” with “stasis, boundaries, identity and fixity” (Ahmed 87), Sara Ahmed in *Strange Encounters* takes a more radical step on issues of migration, relationality and boundary maintenance. She questions whether migration and displacement should contribute to the disruption of essentializing notions of identity within “diaspora spaces” and reveal the fixed positions of otherness that structure hierarchies of power. Highly critical of the general consensus within post-colonial theory that conflates migration with the transgression of boundaries and the destabilisation of identity, Ahmed observes that the gesture of “construct[ing] an essence of migration in order to theorise that migration as a refusal of essence” (Ahmed 82) is problematic in many ways. First, it assumes that “migration can be detached from the social relations in which it is lived” (Ahmed 82). Second, it implies that the “experiences of migration [...] become exoticised and idealised as the basis of an ethics of transgression, an ethics which assumes that it is possible to be liberated from identity as such, at the same time as it ‘belongs’ to an authentically migrant subject” (Ahmed 82).

Ahmed’s determination to complicate the understanding of the migrant’s “politics of location” by problematizing the narrative whereby movement is read as necessarily transgressive proves particularly compelling in diasporic texts that, because of their focus on return journeys, re-introduce questions of context as regards the possibility of having left the homeland. These texts confront migrant characters (and those who accompany them) with both the identities that these migrants think they might have left behind through their relocation abroad and with the new idealised identities that they have chosen or were forced to endorse upon arrival in the host society as multicultural “diaspora space.” At stake here is the way in which migration can work *in favour* of and not *against* fixed notions of identity, notably by cutting off the migrants from the social and material relations that had determined their pre-migration existence and thus, at the other end, by making it easier for discourses of multiculturalism to fix migrants into a symbol of difference enlisted in the service of multiculturalism’s dubious “ethics of alterity,”¹ as Ahmed calls it.

The ossification of fixed forms of identity through migration likewise represents a major theme of Shauna Singh Baldwin’s text, “Nothing Must Spoil This Visit.” In this short story, Arvind, an upper-middle class Toronto-based Sikh who fled India in the wake of his

¹ See Sara Ahmed’s chapter “Multiculturalism and Strangers” in *Strange Encounters*.

political activism against Indira Gandhi's dictatorship, returns to the homeland to visit his family with his new wife Janet, a white Canadian of Hungarian origin. Janet is prone to romantic constructions as regards her husband's Indianness, his imposing "protest story" against Indira Gandhi's regime, and through them, her own adventurous embrace of a politically-loaded form of cultural difference. Her discovery of India in the aftermath of the Indian army's infamous 1984 attack on the Golden Temple of Amritsar and her encounter with Arvind's extended family within an Indian context provide Baldwin's female character with disturbing insights into her husband's personal history and consequently into the moorings of her own inter-racial marriage, which finally appears to be structured not by any true "ethics of alterity," but by intertwined processes of othering that lock Arvind and Janet in mutual projection.

In this essay, I wish to discuss the ways in which the Indian context of Baldwin's story proves crucial in deconstructing the intersecting forms of fetishism upon which Janet's and Arvind's multicultural and inter-racial relationship is based, showing how the narrative comes to equate Janet's self-serving idealisation of her husband as "heroic migrant," "freedom fighter" and "cultural other," with Arvind's own objectification of his wife in conformity with his grandfather's moral legacy: a dream of whiteness derived from the patriarch's past involvement with the British Raj. Although her discovery of the limitations of her construction of Arvind as "freedom fighter" and that of her own commodified positionality within her marriage significantly invalidate the typically Western narrative of freedom, agency and adventurous letting go of "white innocence" into which she has cast her own life, Janet proves finally incapable of discarding such self-defining and self-gratifying narratives *and* of contesting the gendered and racialized stereotypes projected onto her by her husband and her in-laws, which draws ironic connections between Janet's docile enmeshment into Arvind's family's power system and her husband's own compliance with his wife's "multicultural fantasy." Janet's failure in defining herself on her own terms can only be redeemed by a last attempt to rationalize her own superior identity through her victimization of her seemingly submissive Indian sister-in-law before flying off to Canada. This passes silent comment on the ways in which the third-world woman as quintessential "victim" represents the ultimate "point de capiton," in Slavoj Žižek's sense,² holding together the ideological construction of the "Western woman" as agentive and emancipated. So, what interests me in Baldwin's story are the ways in which intersecting systems of othering are depicted as essential to Arvind's and Janet's multicultural and inter-racial relationship, but also how such systems are made to "migrate" within the space of the transnational Indian family itself, which raises the question, too, of their endless reconstitution through and beyond migration and displacement, in keeping with Ahmed's

² For a definition of "points de capiton," see Tony Myer's chapter on reality and ideology in *Slavoj Žižek*.

remark that “some movements across spaces become a mechanism for the reproduction of social privilege” (Ahmed 85).

Miming a headlong plunge into alien territory, “Nothing Must Spoil this Visit” opens in the very midst of Janet’s and Arvind’s journey from Delhi to Shimla, that is, in the middle of a symbolic trajectory originating in a city historically associated with the proclamation of India’s independence and ending in a small town used as a summer resort by the former British colonizers. As the mixed couple approaches the Punjab border, a spot laden with a post-partition history of communal violence, the narrative emphasizes the difficulties met by the two characters trying to map out any common ground in their respective experiences of border-crossing. For instance, Janet’s bookish knowledge about the art and history of India encourages her to turn a blind eye to places and sites that are endowed by her husband with great significance because of their roles in territorial conflicts between Hindus and Sikhs. Moreover, while Janet’s difference as a white woman immediately brings her to the customs officer’s attention, Arvind’s racial invisibility in an Indian context spares him the trouble of volunteering the required visa to access the state of Punjab, which strategically enables him to conceal his Sikh origin from the presumably Hindu officer.

The interlocking racialized, cultural, and gendered nature of the policeman’s othering of Janet is of key interest in this scene. First, the officer’s lecherous gaze at her bare legs indicates that he categorizes her along the stereotypical lines of the loose Western woman. Second, his attempt at male bonding with Arvind through the remark that he “picked up a mame” (Baldwin 109), that is, a “mem-sahib,” as Arvind explains to his wife later on, fetishizes Janet as a racialized object of desire and places her within a history of colonialism associated with with a position of racial privilege. In fact, not only does the policeman sanction Janet’s difference by projecting derogatory gendered stereotypes onto her, but he also constructs her as other by associating her with a racialized position of privilege. The paradox, of course, is that such racialized position of privilege only emphasizes Janet’s lack of agency in an Indian context by reducing her to a fantasized transhistorical object of exchange between white men and brown men. She becomes a mere status symbol between former colonizers and the ex-colonized, as if the policeman’s gaze reflected back to Janet the inevitability of her entanglement within a colonial and post-colonial history in which white women are objectified as trophy wives and boundary markers. The fact that this officer allows himself to share a cheeky comment with Arvind in Hindi about his wife exacerbates the vulnerability and slipperiness inherent in Janet’s paradoxical position of powerlessness *and* privilege, because such comments interconnect the assumption that male homosociality dominates heterosexual commitment with the expectation of a form of Indian solidarity able to rally past “victims” of British imperialism against one of its female representatives. Thus it is quite tricky for Arvind to intercede in favour of his wife on the grounds of gender discrimination without being instantly categorized as disloyal to his Indian identity. To return to

Ambreen Hai's peculiar experience of border-crossing about which she later realizes that the customs officer was in fact "using *gender* advantage to fight a *class* battle" (Hai 154, emphasis in the original), it seems that in Baldwin's text, too, Janet is unwittingly caught in contradictory intersections of power axes because to some extent the customs officer uses what Hai calls "gender advantage" to fight a (post?)colonial battle. That Janet holds the nationality of one of the British Empire's past colonies, even though her Canadian identity is only the outcome of her mother's migration from Hungary as political refugee, adds an ironic dimension to the officer's categorization of her as "mem-sahib" and reveals the extent to which she is first and foremost subjected to what this uniformed representative of power and state authority *takes* her to be.

Interestingly, Baldwin's narrative suggests that Janet's sense of outrage owes less to the shock of understanding how arbitrarily she is categorized as other (and how little she has to do with the archetypal figure of the mem-sahib) than to the shock of realizing how greatly the Indian reality challenges her own role-playing as the knowledgeable ethnographer who is effortlessly able to "blend in." Because she does not understand Hindi, Janet's blindness to the full implications of her positioning along conflicting gendered, racialized and historical lines takes an even crueller and comic turn as she first believes, after Arvind translates the policeman's comment into English for her, that "mame" refers to the free-spirited female character who stars in the popular U.S. movie "Aunty Mame." Thus she superimposes linguistic ignorance upon cultural misreading and Janet's compelling fantasy of herself as transgressive gets in the way of her perception of reality.

Filtered through the female character's point of view, the scene emphasizes Janet's sense of outrage at her husband's tacit compliance with her unfair treatment by the customs officer. Yet, a shift in focalization dramatically recontextualizes the couple's border-crossing by also giving access to the thoughts of the male character. Through this narrative technique, Baldwin endows Arvind's apparent submissiveness with new shades of meaning and passes silent judgement on Janet's blindness to her husband's ethnic difference in an Indian context. Focalized through Arvind, the power dynamics of the scene are no longer structured by a white/other binary but are entirely refigured through the opposition between Sikh and Hindu, which now repositions the male character as a member of a marginalized group taking advantage of his ethnic invisibility to pass as Hindu in the hope that he might smooth out his access to the Punjab. The narrative underlines Arvind's unwillingness to share his own perceptions with his wife:

How could he expect her to understand why he hadn't shown the policeman his passport with the visa permitting him to enter his home state, the visa so stamped and official? There she was, aglow in that inviolable cocoon of Canadian niceness. Whereas he and the policeman were like the twigs of those baskets in the stall—woven together, yet tense with a contained rebellion. You couldn't pull one twig from those baskets without unravelling the whole. He couldn't talk about possible danger and unpleasantness if it were obvious he was a Sikh, couldn't remind her about the articles she'd clipped from the paper for him—

articles on the massacre of Sikhs at the Golden Temple just two years ago, articles that referred to all Sikhs as terrorists. Honesty may be the best policy when you're faced with a Mountie, but here . . . nothing must spoil this visit. (Baldwin 111)

In this passage, Arvind's precarious position as a Sikh facing a Hindu officer seems to account for his silence at the checkpoint. Yet, on closer scrutiny, it appears that the narrative, while highlighting the inauspicious context of Arvind's border-crossing, also maps out the blind spots and hidden zones of his consciousness. Baldwin's use of free indirect speech is particularly apt here because it reveals the extent to which the male character resorts to warped logic by lumping together his reason for not showing his visa to the policeman and his quite different reason for not explaining his predicament to his wife. The fact that Arvind refers to the different policy he might have used, should the same situation take place in Canada and he be "faced with a Mountie" (Baldwin 111), signals that Baldwin's male character is not unaware of the role-reversal in the border-crossing in India. The final rationalization that "nothing must spoil this visit" masks the ways in which Arvind's non-interventionist stance in India is somehow underpinned by his secret resentment at his wife's "white" sense of unassailable security both in Canada and in India. Arvind's perception of his wife as insulated in an "inviolable cocoon of Canadian niceness" (Baldwin 111) is replete with irony in this context, for Janet's stance of ignorance and moral superiority only matches her husband's reluctance to point out the implications of his religious and ethnic difference in India. The suggestion that he is partly complicit in maintaining his wife in such "inviolable cocoon" because he does not want to draw attention to his own lack of involvement in contemporary Sikh politics is emphasized in his repetitive, unconvincing self-justification about all that he allegedly "couldn't" mention to Janet, including the real significance of articles about Sikhs and terrorism that his wife had clipped from the paper for him. That Janet is only vaguely aware of the momentous influence on the Sikh psyche of the infamous 1984 raid of the Indian army on the Golden Temple—and one suspects, of the various discriminations Canadian Sikhs such as her husband had to face after the 1985 bombing of the Air India Flight 182 by Sikh separatists made it easier for the Canadian media to categorize "all Sikhs as terrorists"³—bears witness to Janet's lack of curiosity and empathy, and brings to the fore Arvind's instrumentalization of his wife's ignorance in the hope that he can still pose as the valiant and rebellious Sikh "freedom fighter" who had "enchanted" his wife with his "protest story" against Indira Gandhi's regime as they first met in Montreal, bending "his (then) turbaned head over a sitar" (Baldwin 111).

For indeed, the narrative suggests in more ways than one that Arvind's construction of his wife as "Canadian," that is, as privileged and sheltered, intersects with, and conceals, his own guilt at having distanced himself from contemporary Sikh politics and more precisely

³ The narrative makes it clear that Arvind's and Janet's journey takes place in 1986.

at having discarded the turban shortly after his arrival in Canada. Significantly, the part of the text which is focalized through Arvind never really elucidates his reasons for shunning this all too visible symbol of Sikh identity, as if the character himself shies away from recognizing the extent to which a Canadian context of hostility against Sikhs in the aftermath of the 1985 tragedy had made it difficult not to try to assimilate more fully into the Canadian mainstream and consequently suppress his “ethnic difference.” That Arvind displaces his own unexamined guilt at having renounced part of his cultural identity onto his wife is made evident in the following excerpt, in which Baldwin’s male character parallels Janet’s complete assimilation to the English-speaking majority in Toronto with the discarding of his turbans, implying that his wife’s identification-shift somehow lessens the significance of his own gesture.

Somewhere between Montreal and Toronto, he’d given up arguing against her belief that people all over the world are the same, just with different languages, art and music. When they’d abandoned his turbans and left long arcs of his brown-black hair on the floor of a Greek barbershop in Montreal, a city become hostile to his English, hadn’t she suppressed her French, ignoring Toronto’s bilingual road signs? She who spoke Hungarian on her Sunday long-distance phone calls to Anyu now called herself an Anglophone. (Baldwin 111)

Through the use of the third-person plural (“they’d abandoned his turbans”), the narrative here indicates that Arvind associates his wife with the letting go of his turbans, as if he wanted to shirk responsibility for the surrender of this essential marker of his Sikh identity and shield himself from an irrepressible sense of guilt. Furthermore, Arvind draws on Janet’s personal history, in particular on her relation to Anyu, her mother of Hungarian origin, so as to better pigeonhole his wife as infantile and in need of protection: “Anyu [. . .] must have taken a vow on arriving in Canada to fashion her Janet’s life into a procession of perfect, agreeable, beautiful experiences. Somehow, Anyu had protected her daughter’s illusions through the seventies, and now he had the job” (Baldwin 112). Arvind’s construction of his wife as overprotected gives him free reign to plot his own heroic mission. By paralleling his relationship with his wife with Janet’s relationship with her mother, not only does Arvind fix his wife into a child-like position, but he also fashions an authoritative subject-position for himself through his self-appointed mandate of surrogate motherhood. On the other hand, the above passage also makes it clear that “somewhere between Montreal and Toronto,” a “colour line” was drawn between husband and wife, allowing Janet to self-identify with dominant identities and preserve her naive belief that “people all over the world are the same, just with difficult languages art and music” (Baldwin 111). At the same time Arvind was certainly forced to realize the opposite, that is, that non-white migrants are always marked as “different” however hard they try to “fit in,” and are always in a suspended form of assimilation in a multicultural “diaspora space” covertly dominated by an ecology of whiteness.

In many ways, the border-crossing scene of “Nothing Must Spoil this Visit” sets the tone for the whole story because it suggests the disturbing extent to which socially-sanctioned and context-bound “difference” is recuperated by Janet and Arvind as a means to fix the other into an identity that does not threaten the status quo and their respective forms of narcissistic role-playing. Far from representing a locus through which the two characters can negotiate new spaces for identity, their mixed marriage is in fact portrayed as a power structure that maintains rigid boundaries between the two partners by alternatively smothering and commodifying difference. Significantly, Janet’s anxiety about being downgraded by her husband to “some ignorant tourist who’d read just one guide book” (Baldwin 110) in India is both coupled with her blindness to the complexities of Arvind’s sense of belonging and with her lack of interest in India’s contemporary history. What Baldwin’s text implies is that the female character can only accommodate her husband’s Indianness to the extent that it might shed a positive light on her sense of self and construct her as transgressive and knowledgeable. It is thus unsurprising that Janet’s eagerness to “experience” India recurrently triggers in her fantasies of basking in her friends’ admiration back home, as if her journey to the subcontinent represents less an opportunity to gain new vistas on her husband’s cultural and familial background than a personal rite of passage awaiting to be validated by exterior (and, most significantly, Western) approval. It remains to show that the couple’s stay in Shimla gives Janet ample occasion to live up to her rather theoretical ideal of “leaving behind white innocence and entering the world of experience,” as bell hooks puts it (23). Yet, before doing so, it will be useful to investigate the circuitous route that power can take in Baldwin’s representation of the transnational Indian family in relation to Janet as racial and cultural Other.

Arvind’s and Janet’s stay at Knollswood, the ancestral house in Shimla, both marks a structural turning-point in the narrative and constitutes the apex in the symbolic geography of the couple’s tour in India. The couple’s ascent to this towering place of origin is indeed decentred by sections of the text that simultaneously take place in the sphere of the family house in Delhi and that are focalized through Kamal, Arvind’s younger brother, and Chaya, his wife. In some ways, Kamal’s and Chaya’s voices can be perceived as a chorus which comments separately on the main characters from an offstage position while conveying crucial background information about their mixed union. Because it juxtaposes four different perspectives on Janet’s and Arvind’s stay in India, this narrative device provides Baldwin’s readers with a stereoscopic vision of sorts, one which dramatically broadens the scope of the story. What is more, this shift in focalization contrasts the touristy reality of Arvind’s and Janet’s pilgrimage to the ancestral house with the multi-layered implications and resonances of their visit in the familial sphere.

Through Chaya and Kamal, Baldwin builds up a sense of suspense by exposing and then partially holding back the dark secrets

and underlying fault-lines that run beneath the tolerant surface of the transnational Indian family. For instance, Chaya's recollections about her early inclusion in her in-laws' family put emphasis on her original engagement with Arvind without elucidating why she ended up marrying his younger brother instead. On the other hand, Kamal's angry ruminations about what he sees as his brother's carefree life reveal that Arvind's relocation in Canada constituted an escape strategy supervised by their family so that he could flee the consequences of his political activism against Indira Gandhi's dictatorship. Kamal's resentment of his brother for "acting like an idealistic idiot" and "remov[ing] himself so easily from the responsibilities of love and obedience" (Baldwin 117) through his departure from India underpins his reluctance to acknowledge a sense of community with Arvind and his wife. Baldwin's text implies that the boundaries erected by Kamal between carefree NRIs (Non Resident Indians) and duty-bound RIs (Resident Indians) within the familial sphere only constitute an artifice whose main function is to give vent to his feelings of envy towards his elder brother.

However, what the passages focalized through Kamal and Chaya most interestingly bear witness to is that familial loyalties and parental authority exert powerful, albeit insidious claims on both of the characters' lives. Indeed, even as these passages disclose the gendered nature of the politics of control taking place within the Delhi household, they lay particular emphasis on the interlocking system of rewards and duties that secures Chaya's and Kamal's enmeshment in Papaji's and Mumji's authority. In this respect, it is revealing that Chaya's recollections about the course of her life combine her disappointment at ending up being married to the wrong man with a disconcerting sense of gratitude towards Mumji, the matriarch, for "having "recognized [her] as Destiny" (Baldwin 115) although her mother-in-law was paradoxically the person in charge of the marriage negotiations. In a similar way, even if Kamal's aggressive polo-playing and his obsession with being in control differ from Chaya's passive acceptance of her fate, the narrative counterpoises Kamal's angry fixation on Arvind's carefree life with his unacknowledged financial dependency on Papaji's allowances, thus drawing ironic connections between Chaya's perception of Mumji as the "Great Recognizer" and Kamal's internalization of Papaji as the "Great Provider." The implication here is that both Chaya's amorous fixation on Arvind and Kamal's jealous obsession with his brother somehow feed on their dependency on, and submission to, the bearers of familial authority. In Baldwin's story, the transnational turn of the Indian family is thus coeval with a divide between RIs and NRIs that, while it operates as a smokescreen blurring the real power relations structuring the familial sphere, nevertheless surreptitiously reinforces power hierarchies along generational lines. The following section will show that, in spite of its progressive gloss, Janet's and Arvind's inter-racial union nonetheless negotiates kinship and maintains the bearers of familial authority within a hagiography of sorts.

Although Baldwin's story emphasizes Janet's resistance to narratives that construct her husband as submissive and compliant, the opening up of the text to Chaya's and Kamal's voices ironically recontextualizes Janet's and Arvind's relationship by inscribing Arvind's arrival in Canada, and consequently his encounter with his white wife, within a history of acceptance of familial authority and protection. The multiple focalization of the text reveals the extent to which Janet romanticizes her husband's departure for the New World by associating it with an act of political heroism, even as Arvind confesses that his departure from India was only made possible thanks to Papaji's money. The imaginary parading of her husband's heroism in front of her friends is not the only reason that prompts Janet to prettify Arvind's "protest story." Through recurrent allusions to her mother's dissidence and her subsequent relocation in Canada, Baldwin suggests that the female character refashions her husband's history in conformity to a pre-existing mythic script that blurs Arvind's and Anyu's roles as de-historicized freedom fighters of sorts and thus merges past and present while repositioning Janet as the end product, or rather the focal point, of both her mother's and husband's transcontinental migrations. The question remains whether Janet's misplaced admiration for her husband does not stem from a form of unexamined idealization of her own mother, whose voice and recommendations invariably pervade the segments of text focalized through Janet.

Strikingly, Arvind's relation to Knollswood, his grandfather's house in Shimla, reflects every aspect of his wife's inability to detach herself from a myth of origin that offers ready-made identifications with an all-pervading figure of authority and extends the past into a frozen present. Indeed, not only does Arvind perceive Knollswood as a sanctuary of origin that he half-expects to be "unchanged, with people transfixed like the people of Pompeii" (Baldwin 118) but the ancestral house also represents the model for his own house in Canada, "the house he reassembled halfway around the world in a Toronto suburb called Scarborough – Rajasthan miniatures, silver-framed photos, Brewer's dictionary, ivory and ebony chess set, Wedgewood dinner plates and all" (Baldwin 119). Arvind's careful reproduction of every single detail of his grandfather's house across time and space clearly indicates the long reach of a fixed configuration of the past. Yet, it also hints at the frozen nature of his identification with the deceased patriarch. It is thus no accident that, in spite of his progressive beliefs, Arvind falls back into an attitude of "feudal superiority" (Baldwin 121) towards Kaluram, the caretaker of the house, as soon as he sets foot in Knollswood. Baldwin's text draws ironic connections between Arvind's patronizing attitude as master of the ancestral house and the pro-British allegiances of his grandfather. Knollswood's initial British owner adds up a further disturbing edge to Arvind's imperious behaviour, as if the colonial genealogy of the house somehow suggests a moral lineage in which class-consciousness would come to replace, albeit in a subterranean way, the unacknowledged desire to "act white." In this context, Janet's white presence in Knollswood can be

seen as both legitimizing, and reproducing across time, the heyday of a house which not only “knew solar-topped Britishers and the mem-sahibs with their white parasols, their corsets and their pallid cheeks,” but also, the narrator sarcastically adds, which witnessed “the brown-skinned imitations of the British that followed” (Baldwin 118).

In many respects, Arvind’s relation to Knollswood suggests that his inter-racial union with his wife is instrumental in preserving the “heart of whiteness” that stands at the centre of his fantasy of origin. For Arvind, the ancestral house takes on a mythic dimension in which “history evaporates,” as Roland Barthes puts it (178). Yet, paradoxically, Knollswood also represents a site in which the “soiling traces of origin” (Barthes 179) of the transnational Indian family resurface, threatening to disrupt the hagiography of the family system and to expose the fictitious nature of the romanticized positions of otherness that buttress Arvind’s and Janet’s relationship. Janet’s discovery of an old photograph in which Arvind and Chaya pose as a young couple at Knollswood functions as a hinge-moment of the plot. It causes the protagonist not only to take cognizance of the string of accidents that in fact predetermined her own marriage, but also to grant visibility and reality to Chaya, the quintessential desexed and domestic third-world woman whom she had up to that point conveniently othered as an absent presence. Janet’s confrontation of her husband about the significance of the picture forces her to step out of the refuge of exoticism as she eventually realizes the extent to which Arvind’s former engagement with Chaya overlaps with her own personal history. Yet, this moment of epiphany and recognition is somehow short-lived. For instead of challenging Arvind’s disavowal of responsibility in his arranged engagement and his presumed ignorance about the reasons why his own bride ended up marrying his younger brother, Janet appropriates the fragmentary nature of her husband’s account so far as to take full responsibility for his betrothal, as if she wanted to reconstruct the past so that she could wipe out every trace of Chaya in her couple’s genealogy:

“It was not I who engaged us,” he said.
Knollswood sighed at her back. Not his choice, so he can’t be held responsible. Not his choice. She, Janet, is. She, Janet alone, is [. . .] She was still adjusting to him. A new picture of him. A new picture of Chaya. She stared at the photograph a long, long moment [. . .]
Slowly, with care, she placed her hand in his. Nothing must spoil this visit.
(Baldwin 125)

In this passage, it seems that vicarious guilt constitutes the ultimate psychic register through which Janet is still able to fashion a central subject-position for herself. The consolidation of her positionality is revealed here as being not only dependent on “a specular othering,” to use Samir Dayal’s terms, of a non-western subject (Dayal 52), but also on the erasure of any “stain” left by the Other. Once more, the rationalization and leitmotiv, “nothing must spoil this visit,” operates as an ironic reminder that escapism and denial are essential to preserving the romances of cohesion that sustain Arvind’s and Janet’s inter-racial union.

Still, as the couple descend back into the “furnace of Delhi” (Baldwin 126) which encapsulates, in more ways than just one, the heated and controversial space of the family house, Janet cannot resist interrogating Mumji in private about the break-up of Arvind’s and Chaya’s engagement. Mumji’s reluctant narrative about the innocent ride that Chaya and Kamal took in Shimla and the flat tire that caused them to spend the night alone, unchaperoned, forces Janet to envisage a different cultural reality in which a mere accident can “free-fall” (Baldwin 129) a woman’s reputation to ruin. Bewildered as she is by Mumji’s claim that she had no choice but to “give” Chaya to her younger son and that she had, in any case, originally chosen her stepdaughter to be “an adjustable woman,” Janet self-righteously ponders on the extent to which her stepmother’s use of words reveals in fact a guiltless objectification of Chaya: “Gave her. Took her. As though Chaya were a thing” (Baldwin 121).

Through Mumji, Baldwin points to the pivotal role matriarchs play in both relaying and enforcing the patriarchal ideology of the Indian family. Paradoxically in this context, Janet rationalizes Mumji’s obsession with motherhood and admiring fixation on the “width of her hips” as “gentle intrusions” (Baldwin 113). Similarly, she does not see “any harm” in her stepmother’s requests that she please Papiji, the patriarch, by wearing Indian garments for dinner, to the further extent that “they were only a few days left [before the end of her visit], and then she would return to her work at the Royal Ontario Museum and resume her contemplation of the exotic at a safe distance” (Baldwin 130).

In many ways, Baldwin suggests that Janet’s overconfidence in the superiority of her own cultural positionality as a western woman verges on self-deception and constitutes a smokescreen which spares her the trouble of acknowledging her own commodification by the bearers of authority. Anyu’s representation of her daughter as “a woman raised in freedom” (Baldwin 124) takes on an ironic meaning in this context, for it is precisely Janet’s self-representation as “western” (shorthand for educated, emancipated, self-reliant) that, by freezing her into a position of power and entitlement, ill-equips her to see through the gendered and racialized ideology of her in-laws’ family. Janet’s tacit compliance with Mumji’s demand that she keep their conversation secret from Arvind lest it should “spoil their visit” indicates the dramatic extent to which the protagonist gets enlisted in the matriarch’s “divide and rule” politics of control. More disturbingly, Janet displaces her own feelings of docile enmeshment in the family power system onto Chaya, as if the protagonist could somehow regain a sense of authority by staging her stepsister in the archetypal role of the powerless third-world woman:

Since Shimla, Janet had watched Chaya closely. Would the Arvind she knew today have been happy with so passive a woman? Never an opinion, never any talk. Spoken at, but mostly ignored. Rewarded with jewellery and sweetness for that silent, respectful obedience. And always that beautiful, ephemeral, meaningless smile. (Baldwin 127)

Here, the narrative suggests that Janet's perception of Chaya in fact subscribes to a glib and self-serving rhetoric. Indeed Janet's quick-fix victimization of her stepsister consolidates the fiction of her own privileged positionality, which in turn rationalizes her superior desirability as an empowered, agentive woman, and thus naturalizes away her self-evident status as Arvind's wife. Undoubtedly, Janet's subjectivity is mired in the form of "ethnocentric universalism" that Chandra Mohanty denounces in her article "Under Western Eyes." Indeed, Janet strategically measures Chaya's passivity by taking her own life in the West as the norm, or rather, to borrow Mohanty's words, by setting it against a "yardstick" of "implicit western cultural referents" (Mohanty 336), thus "eating out" Chaya's difference and conveniently suppressing the complex network of culturally-specific power relations that contextualize her life.

But Baldwin's text throws Janet's blind spots into sharp relief by filling in the gaps, that is, by exposing the gruesome tongue-clamping strategy that Mumji's doctor utilized to forcefully, if not literally, silence Chaya into becoming the pliable daughter-in-law who would marry Kamal and later on adjust no matter what. Janet's interrogation of Chaya in the last scene of the story also serves to distance the reader from the protagonist's perspective by both emphasizing her short-sightedness and the arbitrary nature of her privileged positioning. What is more, the psychiatrist-like confidential tone that Janet resorts to in the hope that she could present her cross-examination of Chaya as a token a friendship replicates the orientalist gaze that reduces the Other to a mere object of voyeuristic pleasure and scrutiny, thus revealing the neo-colonial stance that underpins the protagonist's relation to her stepsister. The irony, however, is that the subaltern speaks. And not only does Chaya speak, but she actually co-opts Janet's strategic attempt at female bonding to authorize her blunt enquiry about the protagonist's childless couple. Compelled to break the news of Arvind's infertility, Janet is forced to take the measure of her own difference as Chaya bursts into laughter after realizing that the man she has loved in vain for so long is in fact "not worth marrying," and moreover, "perhaps [. . .] not even worth loving" (Baldwin 137).

Her mock-admonishment to the effect that Janet will have "to learn how to be an adjustable woman" (Baldwin 138) signals a *volte-face* of sorts and indicates a dramatic shift in Chaya's appraisal of her so-called subaltern positionality. Through this unexpected reversal of roles, not only does Baldwin challenge what Nirmal Puwar calls the melodramatic essentialization of the subaltern woman as a "helpless creature" (Puwar 27) but she also points to the limits of western constructions of freedom and feminist emancipation. In some way, Chaya's reaction signifies that freedom as the marker of white women's entitlement and centrality is a mere construct and, by extension, that Janet is powerful on this symbolic level only. However, Chaya's last words are not unproblematic. They suggest the extent to which this character conflates womanhood with motherhood, thus posing the question of Chaya's identification with, and internalization of, the ideology of the family. Ironically, it is because Chaya has

somehow accepted her “place” within this ideology that she is able to derive power and vision from the paradoxes of her marginal position, by opposition to Janet, who proves so much dependent on received scenarios of her own superiority that she is finally incapable of envisaging, let alone accepting, how her childless future might undermine her symbolic power, both “out there” and “in there,” that is, both within the space of the transnational Indian family and within the Canadian multicultural “diaspora space.” It is at such juncture that Baldwin’s text shows that only Chaya is able to “think through the boundary.” She might be the one who stays behind, the one who remains invisible in the “diaspora space” as alleged site of multi-faceted border-crossings. Yet she is the only one having developed an understanding of how the broader patriarchal conflicting hierarchies of power frame her positionality as woman and mother (and by extension that of Janet, the “childless mame” (122)) across cultures.

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