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The Routledge Companion to  
Pakistani Anglophone Writing



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### Doing history right

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## 16

## DOING HISTORY RIGHT

Challenging masculinist postcolonialism in  
Pakistani anglophone literature*Fawzia Afzal-Khan*

According to Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, a figure based on Paul Klee's painting of the *Angelus Novus*, History is not an accident (1942: Thesis IX). Indeed, we must move away from an attachment to what he calls 'erotic historicism' – or the impulse to see history through the eyes of mysticism – into the phase of historical materialism, in order to grow up and do history 'right'. That is, be able to connect present to past and past to present so as to move to a futurity that may be more hopeful than what has gone before. Adding a feminist lens to this Angel of History suggests that one can learn to read/uncover the buried remains in the gaps and fissures of official narratives that constitute History with a capital H – thus giving voice to the marginalised and the forgotten (who are often women, and the dark 'others' of History).

In this chapter I would like to proffer a symptomatic reading of a handful of novels by some prominent contemporary Pakistani and Pakistani-American male novelists, to assess the degree to which they do 'history right' in the ways I deem important – nay urgent – in these challenging times we live in, as I have outlined above. Contemporary women writers of Pakistani origin writing and receiving recognition today, such as Kamila Shamsie, Uzma Aslam Khan, of course our literary godmother Bapsi Sidhwa and a host of others, are, in my opinion, already are/have been 'doing history right'. They are courageous feminist humanists (mostly of the liberal variety, it is true) – connecting past and present in service of delineating more hopeful future possibilities for Pakistan and the world. The men, on the other hand, who are – as is usually the case – receiving far more attention and accolades (in the latest Booker Award news, Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* has been shortlisted, while Shamsie's *Home Fire* has not) – need closer attention for my unabashedly polemical study. In order to arrive at an answer to my question, I would like to begin connecting the past-present continuum by referring to a fairly recent event in the shared history of the world we inhabit, which I refer to as 'the *Charlie Hebdo* affair', and point out its relevance to connecting our global imperialist present to a past colonialist one via a brief reading of Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). The term 'postcolonial' seems apt, in this context, in signalling the continuities of oppression in the Global South, unleashed by Western colonialist and imperialist History, but then also propelled by a self-hating mechanism on the part of the postcolonial subjects of that History (Fanon 2008: 16), into a futurity that is a dead end, rather than an opening-out. When the voices of the marginalised remain trapped in masculinist ideologies, the future remains a

captive of the past. I refer to Salih's novel as a foundational text that informs the repetition of self-hating tropes found in the work of Hamid, Ali Eteraz, and Ayad Akhtar in ways which suggest that they remain trapped in the past, unlike the narrator of Salih's novel, who at least tries to swim ashore to a different land and take responsibility for creating a better future. *Exit West* (2017), Hamid's latest work of fiction, comes closest to breaking out of the prison house of masculinist (self-hating) melancholia.

### **The *Charlie Hebdo* affair and postcolonial male melancholia**

In the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* affair, we have been thrust into a world of postcolonial claims that belie the Keatsian dictum 'beauty is truth, truth beauty; that is all you know, and all that you need to know' – or at least complicate it ('Ode to a Grecian Urn'). Thus, at the very least, we have been forced to ask, whose truth is beautiful? Whose definition of the beautiful (*viz.* satire in this context) gets to represent 'the truth'? Surely value judgements are being made and this value system which is always specific and local to its political and cultural context, though it masquerades as universal and absolute (freedom of speech!), is what ideological critique exposes, as it unmasks the contradictions that systems of power seek to conceal through what French Marxist thinker Louis Althusser dubbed 'ideological state apparatuses' (1971). Newspapers, magazines, books and other media, places of worship, educational institutions, etc. are all part of the ideological state apparatuses through which state power consolidates itself to produce a docile citizenry, or what the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci called 'the consent of the governed': where state repression ends, ideological hegemony begins.

However, as we all know, the work of ideology is never finished – it must constantly reproduce itself to ensure compliance; and, of course, compliance is never guaranteed – because power can be questioned, subjects of power can be radicalised and speak their truth to power. As Paul-Michel Foucault reminded us, power is never unidirectional, victims can have agency (1991). Thus, while those waving 'Je Suis Charlie' banners and placards could be read in this interpretive scheme as those who allowed themselves to be interpellated by the French (read Western/liberal/secular) hegemonic discourse of History with a capital 'H', the killers were counter-interpellating the ideological state apparatus represented by *Charlie Hebdo* (an ironic turnaround for a magazine that started out occupying a counter-hegemonic space in France!) – and thus giving 'voice' to the marginalised.

Many have written about the economic marginality of the Kouachi brothers being representative of the majority of citizens in France of Muslim Algerian descent and, as such, a major contributing factor to their radicalisation in the face of their continued precarity. Such disenfranchisement under neoliberal regimes of power, coupled with Western wars on Muslim lands in the present and the not-so-distant past (especially as far as France's occupation of Algeria is concerned), has been cited as an obvious cause leading to events such as the murder of the *Charlie Hebdo* journalists (see Sharma 2015).

I would like to add a third component to this narrative of marginalised voices: that of the psychic alienation which uprootedness from one's cultural background produces (though leading to different results and possibilities, as I will argue a bit later on). Religion is only one facet of this cultural baggage we all carry. Indeed, as the Sudanese writer Salih's eerily prescient novel *Season of Migration to the North* sets out for us as early as 1966, when it was first published in Arabic, in the aftermath of British colonialism's physical and cultural imperialism in the Sudan, even gifted and brilliant young men who have no affinity to their Muslimness, like the secular protagonist Mustafa Saeed, can become murderers of their oppressors; even when those oppressors become supposed benefactors, welcoming the likes of Mustafa into their

countries, their educational institutions, their homes, and lives. This is precisely the plot line of Hamid's post-9/11 novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), which so brilliantly traces the interconnected histories of past and present, West/East, giving voice to the marginalised 'other' of US History, the novel's Pakistani-American protagonist, Changez. On the one hand, the description of the 'other' – in this case the city of Lahore – can be read as an ironising tactic to crack open Western orientalist tropes, as Anna Hartnell argues:

Hamid provocatively paints a forbidding picture of Lahore, the frame-story's immediate setting, which evokes what Hamid describes elsewhere as Pakistan's 'recurring role as a villain' ('It had to be a sign'). Though the narrator makes much of the city's rich cuisine, its decidedly bloody nature along with the 'shadowy' figures and places that characterize Hamid's Lahore underscore the fact that the novel deliberately filters the city through Orientalist stereotypes, demonstrating its status as a menace in the imagination of the western reader.

(2010: 337)

Yet, one can also argue, as I will later on, that this Pakistani-American novel fails to live up to the Angel of History's dictum for moving beyond an 'erotic history' (the orientalist framing of Lahore in this case) – and into a more mature, more materialistic conception of history that could point to a more hopeful (feminist) futurity, whereas Salih's much earlier novel – despite having a protagonist whose journey to Europe and back home to the Sudan mirrors that of Hamid's narrator Changez – succeeds in this endeavour because of its materialist rather than romantic embrace of history.

Why and how does Salih's *Season of Migration* succeed in puncturing the repugnant present and past of colonialism, to gesture to a more hopeful future rooted in reality and a pragmatic embrace of such reality (without sacrificing principle)? This is a difficult question to answer, especially for my students, who can only deal with Mustafa Saeed as long as they can see/understand him as pathologically disturbed, a crazy man, rather than as a symbolic avenger of the British colonial rule inflicted on his country through his 'conquest' of British women via elaborate sexual games he plays with them, turning them mad and suicidal over time. The only English woman who sees through and resists his counter-orientalist, counter-interpellative but deeply misogynistic moves is Jean Morris, whom he marries; and when he still can't 'conquer' her, he kills her (she invites him to, but only if he also kills himself, which he doesn't do). At his trial, he is exonerated thanks to his defence lawyer, a former professor of his at Oxford – who argues that Saeed was undone by his own brilliance, which these English women whom he bedded simply couldn't comprehend, given their own (em)beddedness in colonialist ideology. According to his English lawyer, Saeed had become Othello, the Moor, one who can never be accepted by the West, and this was the cause of his mental and psychic breakdown, which led to the awful denouement of the murder of Jean Morris, a modern-day Desdemona. In the last scene of this farcical trial, at the end of which Saeed is released and returns to Sudan, he wants to yell out to the courtroom that he is no Othello, that Othello is a Lie, a figment of the West's imagination. It is this Lie, which has haunted his entire existence up until this point, that Saeed has wished to kill; with his exoneration, which he pleads against, the Lie unfortunately lives on, just as his inability to kill himself as he plunges the knife into Jean Morris' heart leads to the continuation of the cycle of history, and the 'other' and 'self-' hatred unleashed by such a history.

What is this 'Lie', and how does it bring this twentieth-century novel and its protagonist into conversation with the *Charlie Hebdo* affair that unfolded in the heart of twenty-first-century Western civilisation, about which Gandhi once famously quipped, 'it would be a good idea'?

Could it be the Lie the West needs to tell itself, about how its actions are solely responsible for the moment we are living in today? Could it be that the Lie of Western civilisation is the insistence on understanding/explaining the murderous behaviour of Othello through the prism/lens that frames him as an 'other', an 'outsider' to norms of emotional control that are supposedly the hallmark of the civilised Western (white) man? As a transplanted 'subject' of Empire, surely (according to the orientalist discourse within which he is located) it is perfectly understandable that Othello falls back on his atavistic urges of uncontrolled jealousy and irrational rage when confronted with his wife's supposed infidelity?

On the one hand, it might be argued that *Season of Migration* simply fuels anti-Muslim prejudices, extending the sphere of Muslim killers to all Muslims, even those who are not *jihadists*, and maybe not even real believers, like Saeed. By extension, anyone – whether a liberal Westerner or a sympathetic fellow Muslim – who brings colonial legacies as an explicating factor into the discussion at hand becomes suspect, an 'apologist' for the vilest extremism, for the killing of innocent women, for Islamist reasons or otherwise. The Lie, then, that Mustafa himself wants to see killed, and thus be liberated from, could be the lie of Blaming the West, the Lie that blames colonialism for all of the ills faced by Muslim nations (and Muslim immigrants to Europe today) – the Lie that Saeed has bought into as an excuse for his own horribly misogynistic behaviour towards the 'prized possessions' of his enemy – 'his' women. On the other hand, if Othello is indeed a creation of the West (much as Saeed proves by telling elaborate lies to the white women he seduces in London regarding the lions and tigers and crocodiles that roam around in his backyard in Cairo!), then later – by becoming the West's object of pity because he has been 'misjudged' and 'victimised' like Othello by his colonial masters (and mistresses) – the Lie could also be one that the West has created, that of the 'poor oppressed Muslim subject' who must be 'saved' through exposure to the superior (and forgiving) civilisation of the West. Both Saeed and Changez – who appears as the protagonist in Hamid's novel half a century after Salih's novel – refuse this objectification by their Western paymasters, and suffer accordingly, trapped in the roles of victims-turned-victimisers, much like the Kouachi brothers and their ilk.

Saeed, the Kouachi brothers, and Changez – and most of the heroes and villains in this continuing saga of colonial history redux – are caught, therefore, in a trap. It's a trap in which the only heuristic model is that of the West and the Rest (Rest = Muslims). And the Rest can be either saved or not, understood or not, accommodated or not, only by the West (or North), which continues to be the point of reference for everything, good, bad, or ugly, in our world.

In such a view of the world, the subaltern truly cannot speak, because the discursive parameters within which subjectivities are shaped and understood are always already in place. It matters not whether the subaltern is poor, ill-educated, living in precarious conditions in the *banlieues* of Paris, like the Kouachi brothers, or an elite-educated professor of economics at Oxford University, like the protagonist of Salih's novel or, more recently, a Princeton-educated Pakistani man like Changez in the *Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The faulty vision of these subalterns who have bought into their own 'otherness' as defined by the dominant discourse – the fact that they can see only with one eye/only in terms of Black and White, Us and Them, the West and Islam, Male/Female, Victim/Oppressor – is matched by the equally exaggerated binaristic visions and discourse of those on the Western/Northern side – such as the discourse of the liberal-left variety, who can only see these 'others' as poor, victimised Muslims to be 'saved'. The unsuspecting white women whom Saeed manipulates can be said to belong to this category, as does Erica in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and they make odd bedfellows with the right-wingers like Marine le Pen (for whom the Muslim 'others' in their midst are nothing more than savages to be obliterated). Perhaps Jean Morris of *Season of Migration*, the only white English woman who challenges Saeed and is murdered by him in turn, fits this latter category

too? An exaggerated hate for the Other may not be that different from an exaggerated Love for the othered 'object'? – something Hamid's protagonist realises about the way Erica treats him, in the movie version of the novel, which prompts his final irrevocable rejection of the West (in this instance, the imperial USA) – and return 'home' to Lahore to become the 'reluctant fundamentalist' of the novel's title. In the novel itself, Erica is more akin to Jean Morris (though without the latter's murderous rage towards her 'other' object of affection) – in that she withdraws slowly, but surely, from Changez into her own world, which has room only for her 'true' lost love, Christian, symbol of the white Christian America that she is losing, the Am/Erica she truly wants to hold on to (dalliances with brown Muslim men aside). Can Trump's Am/Erica be far behind?

However, what differentiates *Season of Migration* from *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and from the novels and plays of Pakistani-American writers like Akhtar and Eteraz for instance, is the presence of the protagonist Saeed's doppelganger. This nameless narrator of *Season* is a product of the *same* history as Saeed, yet points to a different possible future, his thinking/actions exhibiting a materialist conception of history in contrast to Saeed's – and Changez's, or that of Akhtar's Amir in his play *Disgraced*, or of Eteraz's protagonist in his novel *Native Believer* (2006) – more *erotic* fixations on the White woman who, as symbolic avatar of the West, is the prize that must be obtained for the colonised man's injured masculinity to be set right. Truly, these male writers' sensibilities are more romantic/mythic than realist/materialist, more Northrop Frye than George Lukacs!

This desire for the White woman, mingled with a concomitant fear of her sexual prowess that mocks the colonised/conquered man's feminisation – has been accepted as the neurotic symptom par excellence of the Black (or Brown) man in a colonised world. Both the trope and its analysis, by postcolonial theorist and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, seem to apply rather well to the situation of the Brown Muslim man in our neocolonial, imperial times.

Certainly, parts of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* are highly apropos in this context, specifically the chapter on 'The Man of Color and the White Woman', which thematises Fanonian insights into the Black Man as Salih's *Season of Migration* does through Mustafa Saeed's obsession with 'conquering' white English women as a mode of 'revenge' against the colonial 'master' who came and took over the Black man's lands, rendering him as powerless as a wo/man, a no/man.

*Season's* thematisation of the Black man's psychosexual 'split' – his simultaneous desire for the White Man's world (including 'his' prized women), and his inevitable fear and hatred of them and of himself for following the hackneyed path of erotic revenge and other extremist behaviours – acknowledges that split by giving us two different characters who each provides different possible revisionings of the tragedy of colonialism. However, Hamid's *Reluctant Fundamentalist* falls into a dead end of history doomed to repeat the worst, most extremist of its tropes. As indeed do the male protagonists of Akhtar's *Disgraced*, and Eteraz's protagonist in *Native Believer*. These 'heroes' simply become, again in Fanon's terms, 'reactional' and 'negational' (2008: 90). Clearly there are 'actional' and 'affirmative' responses to the situation in which Muslims find themselves today in the West (and elsewhere), circumstances not too different from those of the Antillean Black man (and woman, though her set of neuroses is under-theorised), of the era of colonisation which Fanon analyses. It is the 'actional' responses that Fanon seeks to validate so that we (Blacks, Browns/Others/Muslims) can see that another solution is possible through a restructuring of the world, a way set forth by challenging the backward glance of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History (Marker 2012: n.p.).

Such an 'actional' response requires, I suggest, the desire to discover an alternative path to extremist thinking (West or East, North or South). As the nameless narrator of Salih's novel (who is himself dealing with psychic alienation as a Sudanese returned from England with a

PhD in English literature, and mocked for this by Saeed, who has become a 'nativist' leader in his own village), soliloquises at one point, 'where lies the middle'? In the end, Saeed does come to realise the futility of his actions, which are a result of his own capitulation to extremist modes of thinking and behaviour. But it is the wishy-washy narrator – who has, over the course of the novel, become obsessed with Saeed's symbolic acts of vengeance against the big bad West, and has cast him idealistically as a man of action, seeing himself by contrast as weak because he is unable to pick sides – who actually comes of age in the novel; as such, he points to a different resolution of the psychic alienation unleashed by the ills of colonialism. Finding himself drowning in a river that connects South to North (or East to West), he decides to swim with the current, rather than fight against it, and to swim to the shore, wherever that might land him, whether South or North. In doing so, he makes a choice to fight for life, rather than death. By choosing life, he takes responsibility at long last for his own actions – rather than basking in the destructive glory of the phantasm that Saeed has symbolised. He rejects a Saeedian one-eyed view of the world that can only result in binaristic simplifications, and embraces instead a *jouissance* that moves away from a singular and dualistic vision into a world of multiple visions, allowing for the possibility of several points to land safely, to connect with others, to breathe, to live. Perhaps this is a welcoming vision that can only be promised by a borderless world, where South and North can no longer be distinguished.

This nameless narrator's more historical materialist vision (though stuck within a liberal humanism rather than bespeaking a radical progressive vision) may very well be the one that is presented to us in Hamid's latest novel, *Exit West* – though in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Saeed's ghost seems to be the guiding spirit for protagonist Changez. Before concluding with a few remarks about *Exit West*, I would like to turn briefly to a discussion of Amir in Akhtar's play *Disgraced* (2013), and of the nameless protagonist of Eteraz's novel *Native Believer*.

*Native Believer's* protagonist tells us in his opening salvo that 'In America, those who want something have to dress like those who already have everything' (2006: 7). Like Amir in Akhtar's *Disgraced*, the first-generation Pakistani-American Muslim male in Eteraz's novel – who is defined only as the white Anglo-Saxon blue-blooded Marie-Anne's husband – is someone who is desperate to 'make it' in America, success being measured by how quickly one can ascend the corporate hierarchy and by the fancy clothes, cars, houses, and 'trophy wife' one acquires. The trope of the 'white woman as symbol of success', nay even 'conquest', over those (men) who once ruled the brown or black country whence came these once-colonised men/their forbears, is present front and centre in both these works (as in Hamid's *Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Salih's *Season of Migration* before them). But rather than ironise the trope as Salih does – to reveal its fatuousness and expose the cupidity and self-hatred of the postcolonial male who adopts it (mistakenly) as a mark of success – both Eteraz and Akhtar create protagonists who, like Hamid's Changez, are undone not so much by their own foolish belief in such avatars of success, but by the fact that these white women are truly out of their reach, are uncaring, cold, or simply (as in Eteraz's novel) diseased and morbid (universalist misogyny, anyone?) – and of course, truly out of reach for men who believe themselves to be 'below' them. Eteraz's eponymous protagonist reveals as much when thinking about his wife Marie-Anne:

We were so different, situated in distinct levels of the American caste-system. She came from the priestly class, from those who were presumed to be born with access to divinity. I was from something far lower. Perhaps even an untouchable place. My one hope had been to merge my dirty blood with her pure blood and dilute myself in a new generation. Even that hadn't worked out.

(2016: 178)

Turning his profound self-loathing and attendant melancholia at his 'failed manhood' into a virulent misogyny becomes the *modus operandi* of our erstwhile hero. Thus, his wife Marie-Anne is described as a woman who has grown huge, thanks to some bodily disorder, but even without the extra weight she has always been larger and taller than him, standing 'six-foot-one' over his 'five-foot-eight'; and he tells us that when she 'wore heeled riding boots, [...] I had to look up at her even more than usual' (2016: 8, 9). She walks 'bow-legged' and during sex she likes to play dominatrix games in which she becomes a racist lesbian vampire, making the protagonist a slave to her sexual appetite that is as exhausting as it is unattractive and humiliating, and yet it is a scenario he participates in willingly. Here is a bedroom scene in which the fetishised object for Marie-Anne is a small black co-worker they'd invited to the dinner party that sets the Islamophobic events of the novel in motion, which end up making the protagonist a Kouachi brothers-type of 'native believer' by the apocalyptic end. The black girl who becomes the object of the sexual fantasy game and whom Marie Anne requires to reach her orgasm, might be seen to represent the emasculation of the brown Muslim male at the hands of the all-powerful white woman who, despite being his wife, is never someone he feels he can claim to be equal to; the black woman becomes the 'doll' – like him – to be 'played with'. Self-hatingly, it is the protagonist who serves the role of the 'house slave':

'Yes,' I licked her nipple, 'you tell her she's tiny. A toy.'  
'She's a doll.'  
I licked harder. 'You know what to do with dolls.'  
Marie-Anne nodded and increased her pace. 'I know what to do with dolls. They are to be played with.'  
'Do you play with her?'  
'I take her home. I play with her. All the people see me leave with her. All the men. All the men were staring at her. All the black men and all the white men. They all want her. All the big swinging dicks. But I take her.'

(2016: 28–29)

Not only is the white woman in this scenario a stand-in for white men's desires and power over black and brown men and women, she is also a white mistress with power over the black man's 'woman' and, in taking her, she strikes a deadly blow to seal the colonised man's emasculation.

The protagonist continues in his abjection to his white mistress, and the sex scene becomes a satire not to expose or comment on the black (brown) man's self-hatred as much as an easy misogyny directed at the white woman barking sex commands to her slave:

'Mistress!' Marie-Anne screamed her trigger word. Whenever she uttered it I knew my job was to start licking her nipple even harder [...] Her mouth opened. She was in that imaginary bed with Candace [the black co-worker], where Marie-Anne was the owner, where Marie-Anne was the empress. I licked. My mouth grew tired. Still I licked. My tongue dried up, still I licked. My jaw hurt, still I licked. It wouldn't be long now. Within her vision Marie-Anne would soon reach her desired apogee. The moment when her authority over Candace would be so immense that it would make her explode [...] And then she was still. She'd consumed Candace, chewed her up, turned her into wetness.

(2016: 29–30)

The brown counterparts to these white, emasculating women (like Amir's anti-Semitic mother in *Disgraced*, or the Pakistani-American Muslim woman with whom Eteraz's protagonist has

sexual relations while married to Marie-Anne, like Candace, or even his own loving but uncomprehending mother whose placement of the tiny Qur'an in his living room is the catalyst for his downfall in white America) are portrayed as similarly un-sympatico, major contributors to the psychic alienation their sons and lovers experience in white capitalist America. Muslim misogyny thus becomes a facet of a complex self-orientalising gaze.

### (Self-)orientalism reiterated in our times

And this brings us to the final example of orientalism reiterated, the Pulitzer-winning play *Disgraced* by Pakistani-American Akhtar. If we grant, with Michel Thévoz, that 'exotic representation [is] a constant negotiation between the modalities of ethnographic documentation on the one hand, and fantasy on the other' (qtd. in Kuehl 2011: 33), then certainly Akhtar's play and its reception, both by some of the main actors (whom I interviewed informally after a performance on 8 December 2012) as well as a handful of audience members whom I questioned similarly, would suggest the combative terrain of the play itself as a useful site for the citing and re-citing of orientalist tropes with a difference. These comments ranged from several of the actors stating that they thought the play exposed all of the characters equally as 'tribal-minded' in the final analysis, to a group of South Asian audience members (male and female) saying they saw the main theme as a 'self-loathing that bubbles beneath the surface of the most cosmopolitan of liberal Muslims', which bothered a few of them, though it also felt 'true' to them, to a couple of liberal white women from Dartmouth who felt the play catered to stereotypes of Muslims. Thus, the liminal or border space opened up between the ethnographic impulse for 'authentic' documentation of a multiracial and multi- as well as anti-religious post-9/11 American 'reality' rubs up uncomfortably against not just the fantasy of the white and black Christian/Jewish/atheist/secular characters of the play towards the Muslim(s) in their midst but, more importantly perhaps, against the self-orientalising fantasy to which the main character, a Muslim who has changed his name to the Indian/Hindu moniker Amir Kapoor, succumbs with tragic effect. I would say that this character's final comeuppance (or downfall) ultimately reiterates, and in the process reifies, a white, Western, Judeo-Christian fantasy: the iconic image of the Moorish slave, a *morisco* named Juan de Pareja, who was painted by his master Diego Velázquez in the mid-sixteenth century. Kapoor's wife, an upper-class 'liberal' white woman who is an ambitious artist, is painting a portrait of him based on Velázquez's portrait of his slave – but with a difference: her husband is a well-clad, well-heeled lawyer on the make in a New York law firm specialising in – what else – mergers and acquisitions. Unlike the modest (but clean) lace-front shirt of the slave Juan de Pareja as seen in Velázquez's portrait, Amir's shirts are 'Charvets', high cotton count and costing upwards of \$600 apiece (Akhtar 2013: 38), indicating his status as a supposed master of his destiny. Yet something binds him to the Muslim slave of the earlier portrait. Scholars Thomas Freller and Stephan Herget remind us of the historical context that brought forth the performative of the *morisco* (the Muslim Moor of Spain after the Reconquista) as a 'suspicious subject' of Spain:

under the reign of Philip II, the situation of the Moriscos, as the newly Christianized Muslims living in Spain became known, created conflicts and tension. This in turn gave way to a period fraught with psychological undertones, fear and enmity. As several recent studies have made clear, a person recognized as 'Morisco' at the height of this obsession with *limpieza di sangre* [*sic*] ('purity of blood'), during the second half of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century [the time of Velázquez and of kings Philip III and IV], meant their exclusion from all military and many of

the religious orders, from the prime positions within the state bureaucracy and from all university colleges.

(Freller and Hegret 1999: 110)

Like the orientalist painters whom scholars like Kuehl would have us refer to as painters of the 'Exotic', Velázquez became famous for his 'realism', especially after painting this portrait, whose details of physiognomy and clean but battered clothing (befitting a servant/slave's station) were praised by the most important European painters of the day as 'exhibiting an impressive economy of brushwork' ('Velázquez' 2014: n.p.)

One might argue that Velázquez's famous portrait of Juan de Pareja oscillates between the realistic exterior of a man (a Moorish slave to be precise) depicted in a dignified manner by his master and thus, at one level, serving to destabilise the fantasy stereotypes of unkempt, dirty, and untrustworthy Moors – and the 'covered up' reality of his Moorish slave heritage, which reactivates another level of 'truth': the one that animates a white, Western Christian power fantasy of Empire. A similar fantasy operates in the performative register of *Disgraced*, wherein Amir Kapoor's Charvet shirts do not succeed in liberating him from a slave-like status in the Judeo-Christian painterly and economic realms of which his wife, and her Jewish former lover Isaac, are the obvious rulers. Just as the iterative traces of a previous phantasmagorical painting Velázquez created in 1627 showing the *moriscos* (like Pareja) being driven out of Spain cannot be erased from this latter 'realist' portrait, so too this same oscillating world view, a feeling of being caught between competing ideologies and that in-between space of an orientalist exoticism, permeates *Disgraced* and causes at least two different kinds of reviewer response. On the one hand, according to a review in *Variety*, 'Playwright Ayad Akhtar really sticks it to upper-class liberals in *Disgraced*, his blistering social drama about the racial prejudices that secretly persist in progressive cultural circles' (Stasio 2012: n.p.). On the other, Charles Isherwood writing for the *New York Times* notes:

In dialogue that bristles with wit and intelligence, Mr. Akhtar, a novelist and screen-writer, puts contemporary attitudes toward religion under a microscope, *revealing how tenuous self-image can be for people born into one way of being who have embraced another [...] and what will ultimately tear apart at least one of the relationships in the play is who they really are and what they stand for, once the veneer of civilized achievement has been scraped away to reveal more atavistic urges.*

(2012: n.p.; emphasis added)

Thus, Stasio's review for *Variety* reads the play – and playwright – in a realist mode as 'sticking it to upper class liberals' (2012: n.p.) – in which circle he presumably does not include the Johnny-come-lately Amir Kapoor or his nephew-turned-fundo, but focuses rather (and sees the play as focusing its ire) on the other three characters, *viz.* Kapoor's white upper-class artist wife, Emily; a snooty Jewish art curator named Isaac; and his African-American 'boogie' wife, a competitive colleague at Amir's swanky Manhattan law firm. Isherwood, on the other hand, sees the play's animus as directed against the Muslim male at the centre of the quadrangle. The 'one relationship' that Isherwood sees as 'torn asunder' most obviously is that between Amir and his waspy wife Emily, and when Isherwood states the cause as the 'scraping away' of a 'veneer of civilized achievement' which 'reveal[s ...] atavistic urges' (Isherwood 2012: n.p.), one is put in mind immediately of Joseph Conrad's imperialist fantasy novel, *Heart of Darkness*, where all of the achievements of Western civilisation are shown as facing continuing threat of extinction from the forces of darkness, those savage urges of primal man located in the black jungles of Africa and its supposedly primitive peoples. Clearly, the most obvious example in *Disgraced* of

someone whose 'self-image' is tenuous because he was 'born into one way of being' – that of the brown Muslim man from Pakistan – and who has embraced another mode of being, one where he is hell-bent on distancing himself from his 'atavistic' past and entering the rarefied and aspirational realms of white, upper-class, 'civilised' America – is Amir. The play reverses the nineteenth-century Conradian journey of the civilised white man into the jungles of Africa – where he turns into the worst of the savages he encounters whilst taking a black woman as his mistress – to a contemporary fable where the Black (or Brown) man comes to the Heart of Civilisation in the twentieth century – New York City – to achieve the glories of a well-heeled 'civilised' life in the West, acquiring his white 'trophy' wife to cement his virile success. In the process, it isn't he who turns into a likeness of those he aspires to – rather, he exposes the darkness lurking in their hearts – but ultimately, this being the USA and not the Congo (or Pakistan), civilised norms prevail for the three 'natives' (white/black/Christian/Jewish) who were 'born' (or at least 'bred' from an early age) into their proper 'classed' roles which subsume/smooth over presumed differences of race, gender, ethnicity, and religion, whereas poor Amir regresses back into the savage he always/already was.

And, of course, the savagery has a gendered/sexual dimension, for otherwise the orientalist trope would not be complete. Upon learning that his wife has had an affair with Isaac, he exhibits the Moor's innate and uncontrollable jealousy (think *Othello*), and all the lovey-dovey cooing and gentle bickering with his wife earlier in the play gives way to rage expressed in a symbolic slap across Emily's face, followed by some vicious kicking thrown in for extra measure as she writhes on the floor of their sophisticated living room. This being twenty-first-century Manhattan – rather than sixteenth-century Venice or, which amounts to the same thing in the play, twenty-first-century Pakistan – and Emily a modern twenty-first-century woman with means of her own, she leaves rather than waiting to be disfigured or killed by the jealous Muslim male now giving full reign to his long-repressed savage instincts that, as he himself earlier reminded his wife and dinner guests, are sanctioned by the Qur'an. In this interpretation of an (in)famous Quranic verse, he had ironically been challenged by the same wife who is now the victim of his abuse. The scene where the play enacts the thin and essentially non-negotiable difference between the exotic and the orientalist is the final one which collapses into the sameness of a recognisable iterative performativity: that of the slave/Moor/Muslim gazing forlornly as his white mistress/wife slips, like the civilisation she represents, always and already beyond his grasp. As he is packing up his belongings to move out of the apartment they had once shared – and listening to the story of FBI harassment by his nephew who had changed his name from Hussein Malik to Abe Jensen to 'fit in' at the play's beginning, and has now re-embraced his Muslim identity by changing his name back and donning a *kuafi* (skull) cap – Amir's ex-wife shows up. She is there to hand him the portrait she had been painting of him in the opening scene of the play. What exactly is she 'returning' to Amir here?

At the conclusion of the ill-fated dinner scene, when all civilisational masks had fallen off, and everyone's prejudices and uglinesses had been revealed, the ugliest and most atavistic of all interior spaces to be denuded was most clearly Amir's. Echoing the sentiments of Hamid's protagonist in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Amir at that turning point in the play had triumphantly admitted to feeling a sense of 'pride' with other co-religionists on 9/11 when the Twin Towers were hit. After such an admission – no matter that he immediately says he felt horrified by feeling this way – there is no redemptive possibility for Amir. When he leaves the party to get a bottle of wine with Jory (his African-American colleague and wife of art curator Isaac) to celebrate the news that his own wife has made it into Isaac's show at the Whitney (after Emily has taken him into the kitchen apparently to admonish him for his bad behaviour thus far), Isaac, left alone with Emily, reminds her of their affair in London, which she then proceeds to insist was

a mistake. Isaac's response is that it is her marriage to Amir that is a mistake. After telling Emily that her husband 'doesn't understand you', Isaac claims that it is clear from his expression in her portrait of him that Amir 'is looking at you [with an] expression [of] shame, anger, pride: the slave finally has the master's wife'. When Emily protests weakly at this interpretation of her portrait and Amir's gaze in it, Isaac continues: 'A man like that [...] you will cheat on him again [...] and then you will leave him' (Akhtar 2013: 61, 62).

Arguably then what Emily is 'returning' to Amir in the sad final scene – after the dinner party has ended in catastrophe, in the apartment where he now stands alone, humiliated and shorn of all of his 'civilisational' achievements and aspirations, pleading with her, 'I just want you to be proud [...] proud that you were with me' (Akhtar 2013: 76) – is that 'gaze' which Isaac had described as a slave's gaze combining shame, anger, and pride at finally 'owning' the master's wife. If Malek Alloula claimed in his *Colonial Harem* (1987) that the work of postcolonial critics like himself, following Said, was a belated 'returning' of the colonial photographers' orientalist 'gaze' to the colonisers who tried to appropriate the lands and the women of the Muslim lands they conquered through their phantasmic portraits of native women (Algerian women in Alloula's case), then Emily, in a classic double-reversal of the postcolonial returning of the master's gaze (much like Jean Morris in Salih's novel), is re-turning the imperial gaze back on its 'subject', and thus reiterating the orientalist performative: You, O Slave, will never 'own' me, so take back that look of pride, anger, resentment with which you foolishly thought you could lay claim to my domain. Unlike Jean, who kills herself in a symbolic gesture that acknowledges white imperial culpability in the cycle of violence, Emily – in a play written by a brown Muslim man half a century after *Season of Migration* tried to suggest a path out of orientalism's morass – ends up signifying its return, bigger and badder than ever.

Suffice it to say that in Eteraz's novel too, as recently as 2016, we are presented with a series of tropes that mimic Akhtar's reiterative orientalism. Pauls Toutonghi, reviewing *Native Believer* for the *New York Times Book Review*, asks an important question about the tripling of hate crimes in the US against Muslims in 2016, a question that is central to my own argument in this chapter:

How much is our cultural marketplace to blame – where the narratives that sell most widely are ones that, arguably, do little to advance understanding, or even dialogue, across difference?

(2016: 17)

My thesis has been that most of the Pakistani/Pakistani-origin male writers who have been or are being lionised by the West have produced works that reiterate orientalist clichés about Islam, Muslims, and Brown 'others' as essentially 'exotic', unknowable, given to atavistic urges that confirm the savagery lurking beneath supposedly civilised exteriors; repeating the trope of the Muslim male as always-already an Othello, his obsessive lust for, combined with his jealous mistrust of, a white woman, the reigning trope of his desire to be seen as a Man, an impossibility given his inferiority complex *vis-à-vis* the white master who colonised his lands; especially when the white woman he painfully 'acquires' (Jean Morris, Marie-Anne, Erica, Emily) as a possible symbol of his counter-conquest turns out to be yet another emasculator, in league with her 'own' race. 'What a history', to quote Sara Ahmed (2014: 203). It is one that persists in our times, but requires of us different moves if we wish for new and better futures; to move away from erotic historicism to a materialist conception of history; away from misogyny and self-hatred spun as dreams of conquest, into 'wilful arms' that, as part of a collective historical struggle, can actually bring down the walls of a history that has become concrete and tiresome in its clichés. The 'persistence of protest' can help prevent 'every hand' played by the

Black/Brown/Muslim man from becoming a 'losing hand', such as to liberate the arms of the Other from their 'otherness', smashing the Hegelian dialectic in the process, and thus realising Frantz Fanon's 'decolonizing humanist project', however belatedly (Ahmed 2014: 203).

None of the male Pakistani/Pakistani-American writers I have discussed in this chapter inhabit such a decolonising humanist project, though each does hint at the need to move away from a nihilistic despair and regurgitation of old clichés towards some new vision, even if expressed negatively. Part of the problem each of these writers faces is their inability (unwillingness?) to tell a story in which their protagonists see themselves as part of a collective historical struggle, which is what saves the narrator of Salih's *Season of Migration* from succumbing to nihilistic despair and, instead, has him commit at the end to a desire to land on the shore, to build connections between South and North; unlike Saeed, who warned of the danger of 'seeing only with one eye', Salih's narrator keeps both eyes open and on the horizon of change. Changez does return to inhabit a collective struggle back in his homeland of Pakistan, but his larger struggle is subservient to the demands of fictional strategy – the author's need to tell a gripping tale in which the reader is kept guessing until the end whether or not Changez's struggle is a worthy one or negatively in thrall to the demands of 'terrorists'. Akhtar faces a similar dilemma in his portrayal of Amir, who stands against the twin demands of Islamophobia and Islamism, which are essentially communitarian ideological visions. In order to take a stand against both ideologies, Akhtar creates a protagonist who remains an isolated individual, unable to connect to any sense of a community or to a larger struggle for justice for Muslims, or Palestinians, or for other people of colour such as Jory. It is his individual plight that the play focuses on, which is doomed to failure given its tethering to a romanticist, erotic historicity rather than a dialectical materialist one. Similarly, Eteraz's nameless protagonist does not see himself as part of a collective historical struggle, even when he is rejected and cast aside as an employee because of his boss' Islamophobia. His professionally successful wife's ballooning size, while he starves metaphorically in the workplace without a job, could be read as the diminishment of his individual masculine ego, while America's imperial might balloons unchecked. The 'Commie Muzzies' he begins to hang out with are presented as a joke, rather than as an example of a truly progressive collective struggle for justice that might help recast the terms of the historical impasse of our current *poco* moment in favour of a decolonising futurity. Unfortunately, the work discussed here is mired in a present in which an individualist ethos in thrall to global capitalism reigns supreme, whether of the imperialist or the Islamist variety, no exit in sight ...

### Exit West – and East?

Unless we exit West. That, in a nutshell, is the vision adumbrated in Hamid's latest novel, an interesting stylistic and thematic cross between J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*. Where, in Sartre's play, 'L'enfer, c'est les autres' or 'Hell is other people', Hamid's novel moves from such a pessimistic Sartrean existentialism to a more joyous sense of community that is the heart of the Potter universe and saves its inhabitants from the tyranny of rule by one supreme power, a He who cannot be named. Hamid's Pakistani protagonists, who start out as the young lovers Nadia and Saeed, flee through mysterious trapdoors, once the decimation of their country by Islamist gangs begins, into different countries of Europe which they keep exiting, from Greece, into England, ending up by the end of the novel at the furthest end of America, in Marin county, where:

there was nonetheless a spirit of at least intermittent optimism that refused entirely to die [...] perhaps because Marin was less violent than most of the places its residents

had fled, or because of the view, its position on the edge of a continent, overlooking the world's widest ocean, or because of the mix of its people.

(2017: 192–193)

This mix of people in Marin includes very few 'Natives' who, we are told, had either 'died out or been exterminated long ago' but whose surviving elders, when they appeared, told 'tales [...] that people from all over now gathered to hear, for the tales of these natives felt appropriate to this time of migration, and gave listeners much-needed sustenance' (2017: 196).

This present time is rendered within a materialist dialectic that brings together the experiences of descendants of African slaves brought forcefully from their homes to the shores of the American continent three centuries ago, with those of the 'other' natives – those who trace their 'nativeness' to the white colonists from Britain. Yet, in this latter time of mass migration brought on by the depredations of a coloniser–capitalist–imperialist–patriarchal class system culminating in a violent globalisation that has left no one untouched, Hamid paints a picture of a post-apocalyptic world where we have all become refugees, including the white folk who are now also experiencing things falling apart:

It seemed to Saeed that the people [...] who claimed the rights of nativeness most forcefully, tended to be drawn from the ranks of those with light skin who looked most like the natives of Britain – and as had been the case with many of the natives of Britain, many of these people seemed stunned by what was happening to their homeland [...] and some seemed angry as well.

(2017: 196)

For Saeed, it is the African–American descendants of slaves who provide the greatest source of comfort in a world whose history demands to be remade if humanity is to survive and perhaps thrive once again:

A third layer of nativeness was composed of those who [...] had been brought from Africa to this continent centuries ago as slaves [...] this layer [...] had vast importance, for society had been shaped in reaction to it, and unspeakable violence had occurred in relation to it, and yet it endured, fertile, a stratum of soil that perhaps made possible all future transplanted soils, and to which Saeed in particular was attracted, since at a place of worship where he had gone one Friday the communal prayer was led by a man from this tradition [...] and Saeed had found [...] this man's words to be full of soul-soothing wisdom.

(2017: 197)

We can see that Saeed's attachment to the ritual of Muslim prayer becomes a conduit for remembering his parents, for what was past, but also for developing attachment to other traditions of prayer, such as that represented by this African–American preacher. Through participating in this communal activity, he finds love anew with the preacher's daughter, but only after both he and Nadia separate in a peaceful and loving way, and Nadia embraces her desire for communion through same-sex love for a woman with blue eyes, a cook in their community of migrants.

*Exit West* embraces the art of collective survival, and all the different types of border crossings that it demands of us, including a leap of faith across the gender, religious, class, and race divisions that keep us trapped in a world without exit. Whilst the narrator of *Season of Migration to the*

North finally accepts life and the need to negotiate its demands for justice without succumbing to nihilistic violence despite the unfairness of history for its victims – just as, half a century later, the protagonists of *Exit West* attempt to do the same in the imperial centres that continue to victimise them – the real question now is: will the North/West similarly show itself capable of absorbing these ‘other’ narrators of his/her/story? Will the (waning) West allow its power a safe exit, so that the horrors of hell, where all protagonists and antagonists remain tethered to otherness, can be avoided? Will the East jettison its self-orientalising habits? Or, to circle back to Benjamin (via Chris Marker), can we turn the Messianic impulse so prevalent in our present moment into ‘a secular acknowledgement of the possibilities of creating Heaven on Earth, interpreted as the *potential* in each moment for the radical change of everyday conditions’? According to Marker, ‘this is the service of theology that Benjamin wished to enlist. Not the promise of a redemptive afterlife, but the political charging of each and every moment of experience’ so as to create ‘Heaven on Earth’ (2012: n.p.; emphasis added). Surely, by locating the theological impulse within a secularist mode of class, race, and gender struggles for equity, a new kind of Angel will come forth, consigning its white wings to a debunked history in favour of another world of multicoloured herstories. This ‘other’ world is not only possible, it is already here.

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