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***'THE POLITICS OF GENRE CRITICISM:
THE CASE OF POSTCOLONIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY'***

Keywords: postcolonial studies, autobiography, poetics, genre theory, Equiano, Naipaul, Suleri

Abstract: Postcolonial Studies has often been accused of ignoring the material histories of colonialism and its legacies by virtue of its focus on textual relations and representations. Paradoxically, however, the 'Holy Trinity' of postcolonial theorists, Said, Bhabha and Spivak, are not noted either for the detail or the subtlety of their engagements with literary texts. Nor have they evinced much interest in poetics, especially the poetics of genre. This paper proposes that political criticism and traditional forms of literary-critical analysis may be complementary rather than opposed forms of engagement with aesthetic texts. This argument is advanced by analysing aspects of postcolonial engagements with the genre of autobiography. By exploring how postcolonial autobiography challenges and adapts some of the established poetics of autobiography as it is conceived in the West, the paper will suggest that the sub-genre establishes its distinctiveness in terms which are at one and the same time formal and ideological in nature.

Introduction

Postcolonial Studies has often been attacked for reducing the material histories of colonialism and its legacies to a series of textual transactions (Parry 1987, Ahmad 1992, San Juan 1998, Lazarus 1999). This alleged tendency is repeatedly ascribed to the fact that the sub-field emerged in departments of literature where, to a significant degree, it remains housed. *Pace* such criticisms, it is striking that traditional forms of close literary-critical analysis are largely absent from the work of two members of 'the Holy Trinity' of postcolonial theorists, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, despite the fact that the former was initially trained in and taught literary studies, while the latter occupies a chair in a Department of English and Comparative Literature. *The Location of Culture* contains no more than scattered remarks on literary texts; and on the rare occasions that *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* engages with such work, as in the suggestive comparison of *Frankenstein* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the approach is political / ideological, with little detailed reference to the aesthetic properties of either narrative. Edward Said, by contrast, offers a more sustained set of such engagements, notably in *Beginnings* and *Culture and Imperialism*. But while more alert than his colleagues to how literature complicates and challenges politically-grounded interpretative approaches, for example in his reading of

Kim, he shows no strategic interest in the part which poetics plays in this process. Strikingly – for the purposes of this essay – issues of genre more specifically play relatively little role in Said's work, even in *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*. In his urgent and understandable desire, particularly in *Orientalism*, to demonstrate that literary works are 'situated' and 'worldly,' Said, too, has perhaps encouraged the view that analysis of poetics is secondary to the task of elaborating literature's complex ideological operations and effects.

By examining postcolonial engagements with autobiography, I hope to demonstrate that one does not have to choose between traditional techniques of formal analysis on the one hand and those of political criticism on the other. Rather I will attempt to show that close attention to the poetics of genre and related aspects of form can reveal the often considerable political / ideological investments of the writing concerned in ways which may be more nuanced and subtle than a purely thematic approach to such issues. The aim is to demonstrate the possibility of a mode of critical reading which is at once politicised and respectful of the specific aesthetic character of the texts concerned.

The poetics of western autobiography are multiple and complex; to a considerable degree, however, the identity and integrity of the genre have traditionally been secured in relation to a number of related unities. One is the presumed unity of the autobiographical Subject, construction of which is held to be the primary thematic and topological characteristic of the genre. A second and related property is the coherent development and unfolding of the process by which that Subject becomes constituted. The third is the establishment of clearly defined borders around the autobiographical text, securing it to a greater or lesser degree against competing genres. Postcolonial engagements with autobiography as it has been understood in the West involve reconsiderations of all three of these properties and their adaptation to new uses and meanings. Such interventions, as will be seen, are not simply experiments for their own sake, but reveal and challenge the sometimes deeply ideological / political operations of western autobiography and the critical field which surrounds it.

Fragmented subjectivity

The psychoanalytic elaboration of 'the unconscious' as a crucial dimension of subjectivity emerged roughly coterminously with the beginnings of Autobiography Studies. Yet throughout most of the twentieth century, as Paul Smith argues (*Discerning the Subject* 104), the latter has consistently conceived of the proper Subject of canonical autobiography 'as the whole and coherent human being who underwrites [...] the possibility of knowledge about the self.' Such liberal-humanist conceptions of Selfhood had long been critiqued by the Marxist tradition which was, however, notably absent from Autobiography Studies. They came under renewed pressure from both post-structuralism and feminism in the 1980s, forces which the sub-field found it much harder to ignore. Post-structuralism argues that the human Subject is always already decentred,

notably through its construction in language. Meanwhile, feminist critics like Sidonie Smith suggested (*Subjectivity* 155) that women life-writers have long looked ‘to the politics of fragmentation as the means to counter the centrifugal power of the old unitary self of western rationalism.’

One might argue that postcolonial autobiography, too, has historically been preoccupied by ‘the politics of fragmentation’ as these bear on the constitution of its Subjects. However, it would be a mistake to argue that the sub-genre is intrinsically or inevitably characterised by fractured models of subjectivity. On the contrary, there’s a deep-rooted tradition which attempts to construct unified, coherently developing autobiographical Selves according to the paradigm traditionally prized in Autobiography Studies. This bifurcation can be briefly illustrated in the contradictory accounts of Caribbean autobiographical subjectivity provided by John Thieme and Sandra Paquet respectively. For Thieme (*Appropriating* 215), ‘the fragmentary, heterogeneous nature of the society precludes the possibility of [...] a unitary Cartesian self.’ For Paquet (*Caribbean Autobiography* 234), by contrast, it is precisely such factors which underwrite the ‘quest for wholeness’ in so many Caribbean life-writers. This opposition of views should not, however, disguise the common assumption underpinning them: that colonialism often radically destabilises ‘peripheral’ identities.

Ambivalence about appropriate models of autobiographical subjectivity extends back to the earliest theorisation of postcolonial identity in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. On the one hand, the text suggests that the correct response to the psychic disintegration inflicted on so many colonial subjects is a strategy of Self-reconstitution as a whole being. Thus faced with racial discourses which make him ‘dislocated,’ if not a ‘triple person,’ Fanon claims (*Black Skin* 112, 119) that: ‘I [must] put all the parts back together.’ On the other hand, he denies (*Black Skin* 136) that ‘wholeness’ can be recovered by an appeal to essences, especially racial ones: ‘Negro experience is not a whole, for there is not merely *one* Negro, there are Negroes.’ He solves the dilemma by offering a dualistic model of subjectivity represented in his striking image (*Black Skin* 63) of ‘the zebra striping of my mind.’

If Fanon provides the first theorisation of (post)colonial subjectivity, the issues he addresses preoccupy the sub-genre from its earliest precursor forms. Thus a decentered or dualistic nature of personhood is clearly evident in Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* (1789), the title page of which reads: ‘*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written By Himself.*’ There is much to notice in a close literary-critical reading of these seemingly uncontentious lines. Equiano’s positioning of his African name first appears to be a deliberate act of affiliation by which he proclaims his identity as a ‘stranger’ to his metropolitan British audience. Its significance in this context is suggested by Vincent Carretta’s observation (*Equiano* xvi) that: ‘Outside of his autobiography, the author of *The Interesting Narrative* almost never called himself Equiano.’ Later in his text the author explains how he initially resisted the second, Latin slave name – Gustavus Vassa – imposed by his first owner Lieutenant

Pascal. However, coercion obliged him to adopt it, so that it eventually becomes the appellation 'by which I have been known ever since' (1789: 64). Significantly, however, Equiano does not take this opportunity of the publication of his life-story to disavow the slave name. This may have been partly for commercial reasons (Equiano, one infers from Carretta, would have been a name unknown to the public); but the author perhaps also recognised useful connotations in the slave name (Gustavus Vassa was the sixteenth-century Swedish monarch who led his subjugated people to independence.) Above all, the apparent *conjunction* 'or' in the title perhaps primarily signifies *disjunction* between the identities represented by Equiano's African and European names, posing them as distinct, if not alternative identities. Finally, the ascription 'Written by Himself' (third-person 'himself' rather than first-person 'myself'), while not unprecedented in eighteenth-century autobiographical texts, emphasizes from another angle the disjunctive subjectivity which will be the narrative's dominant way of conceiving Selfhood. The opening pages of the text, with their symptomatic slippage between first and third person in Equiano's account of childhood in Africa, reiterates this disjunction and sets the terms for the pattern of self-identification in adult life.

The identity which Equiano finally assumes has provoked considerable critical debate. At one extreme some argue that the very fact of his writing an autobiography signifies the degree to which he had become assimilated to metropolitan British culture. At the other, some claim that Equiano appropriates the traditional form of spiritual autobiography in a consistent strategy of subversive mimicry, designed to allow him to substantially retain his 'original' African identity. In view of the discussion of the title page above, neither interpretation is fully convincing. Equiano's image of the chequer-board (*The Interesting Narrative* 263) to figure his life towards the end of his text symbolises, in Fanonian fashion, the adjacency, but continuing separateness, of the 'black' and 'white' elements of his identity. He thus retain characteristics of each affiliation, even if the relationship is sometimes conflictual, rather than resolving them into the kind of unitary synthesis represented by the 'melting pot' model of hybridity - and which is traditionally held up as the desirable ideal of western autobiographical subjectivity.

Across its geo-cultural and historical range, postcolonial autobiography often elaborates such models of decentred, even disjunctive, subjectivity. Thus, towards the end of *Out of Place*, Edward Said proclaims (*Out of Place* 295): 'I experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many are attached.' Some might see such statements as simply reiterating recent western elaborations of 'the death / dispersal of the Subject.' But Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* obviously long predates postmodernism. Equally, more recent postcolonial texts with a comparable emphasis on the decentred or fragmented nature of auto/biographical Selfhood rarely celebrate that quality in the abstract philosophical terms of some poststructuralist discussions of subjectivity. Rather it's generally represented as the effect of the material histories and relations of colonialism, in which new and sometimes

radically conflicting identities are inscribed in palimpsestic fashion on the subaltern, often – as in Equiano’s experience – by force. Consequently, an adjustment of existing autobiographical poetics as these relate to the thematics / tropes of subjectivity is required to adequately narrativise the effects of these histories on the identity of postcolonial writers.

While testifying to the disintegrative operations of colonialism on the (formerly) colonised, such decentred identities can also be turned to advantage, as Said suggests, to express agency and a capacity for self-renewal after the cataclysm of invasion, subjugation, even ‘translation’ overseas. Equally, they enable the writer to evade the fixed identities through which regimes of (neo-)colonial stereotype, in particular, seek to fix the (post)colonial Subject in an inferior relation to the dominant. As Gillian Whitlock (*The Intimate Empire* 6) argues, ‘thinking in terms of origins and authenticity, centre and periphery, and the separation into consistent and homogenous identities are fundamental to colonizing discourses.’ By contrast, non-unitary subjectivity also allows the writer to escape potentially coercive demands to conform to nativist or essentialist forms of local identification, or what Edouard Glissant (*Poetics of Relation* 13) calls ‘the single root.’ Having said that, one should beware of too hasty celebration of decentred models of identity as against unified or centred ones. For example, V.S. Naipaul’s *A Way in the World* (1994), to be discussed later in this essay, despairs at the seeming impossibility of grounding Caribbean identity in terms stable enough to provide security and self-esteem. Equiano and Said’s texts, too, are at times characterised by profound melancholy at being denied more foundational existential anchors.

Fracturing the boundaries of genre

Until the 1980s, the usefulness of the analytic category of genre remained generally unquestioned. Genre meant sets of rules to which particular texts had to conform in order for crucial aspects of their identity to be recognised. Autobiography had certainly not always proved easy to classify in watertight terms. Nonetheless – as the existence of the canon suggests – there’d been broad agreement in practice about what was and wasn’t included, with critics happily operating within the horizon of what Derrida (*Critical Inquiry* 56) describes as the fundamental ‘law of genre,’ namely that “genres are not to be mixed.” Thus as Laura Marcus argues (*Auto/biographical Discourses* 181), from its inception, the critical sub-field has expended enormous effort on ‘the project of “rescuing” autobiography from incorporation’ into other genres. However, poststructuralist notions of inter-textuality and inter-genericity posed radical problems for traditional definitions of genre, including autobiography. Indeed, Paul de Man famously concluded (*Autobiography* 266) that the tropological nature of language meant that ‘the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either / or polarity but one that it is undecidable.’

In general independently of post-structuralism, feminist criticism since the 1980s has argued that western women's autobiography can be differentiated from its canonical male counter-parts by the degree of its experimentation with, or fracturing of, the hitherto broadly accepted boundaries of autobiography. As Shari Benstock, for example, put it (*The Private Self 2*): 'Writing that works the borders of definitional boundaries bears witness [...] to the freedom and dispossession of existence outside the law.' Leigh Gilmore (*Autobiographics 96*) spells out the ultimate implications of such disobedience, asserting that if the genre as traditionally conceived 'seems closed to women's self-representation, then women may choose forms other than straightforward, contractually verifiable autobiography for self-representation.'

A comparable fracturing of the boundaries of autobiography as traditionally conceived is widely observable in postcolonial autobiography. Once more, Fanon provides a strategic template for the sub-genre in its renegotiation of 'the law of genre.' At once 'a clinical study,' a tract of political philosophy and 'the sum of the [existential] experiences [...] of seven years of the author's life' (*Black Skin 16, 40*), it also ranges between the modes of scientific analysis, confession and poetry, and between the oral and the literary. Indeed, this extraordinarily hybrid form and its multiplicity of generic styles are perhaps the principal reasons why *Black Skin* has rarely, if ever, been studied under the rubric of autobiography – a lacuna I've tried to redress recently (Moore-Gilbert: *Postcolonial Life-Writing*). Nonetheless, it clearly anticipates the experimental stylistic properties of some western women's autobiography, which can be so radical in nature that it has generated new descriptive terms, such as 'autobiographics' and 'autogynography,' to replace the older term 'autobiography.'

However, the severe, at times almost overwhelming, contamination of autobiography by other genres in postcolonial autobiography long predates Fanon. Thus the opening chapters, at least, of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* conform far more to the conventions and poetics of ethnography, or – more properly, perhaps, *auto-ethnography* – than to those of spiritual autobiography. Equally Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole* (1857) might as easily be shelved in a book-shop under travel-writing as autobiography. And of Nirad Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951), G.D. Devy critic has commented huffily (*Romantic 65*) that it is no more than 'a book of erratic [historical] essays.' Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1994) is another such example, the oxymoronic title drawing attention to her wilful erosion of the borderlines between autobiography and biography.

Kincaid's text also notoriously blurs the border between fiction and autobiography. Indeed, the traffic with fiction has probably been the most common threat to the supposed integrity of the genre in postcolonial autobiography. Notable examples which play on the conjunction range from Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1957), through the series of texts produced by Mulk Raj Anand, beginning with *Seven Summers* (1968), the comparable later series by Kincaid, to Hanif Kureishi's *Intimacy* (1998). Naipaul's *A Way in the World* is, however, a particularly striking

example. The generic undecidability of the text is first flagged in the sub-title; in the U.K. this is 'a sequence', in the US 'a novel.' Neither bespeaks a desire to embrace autobiography in any straightforward way. The problems of recognition and classification this poses for the reader continue within the text itself, beginning with the table of contents, which signal the complex generic affiliations of what follows.

Perhaps most obviously, the apparently autobiographical sections are mixed in together with non-autobiographical ones. However, the challenge to the boundaries of genre is more severe than this. Thus one 'autobiographical' section is titled 'History' and three other sections, despite ostensibly being non-fiction, are each oxymoronically subtitled '*an unwritten story*,' the term 'story' signalling at least some engagement with fiction. The traffic between fiction and non-fiction continues in the opening 'autobiographical' section, 'An Inheritance,' which is described as a '*Prelude*,' perhaps inviting comparison with Wordsworth's poem, not just as an autobiographical meditation on the 'growth of an artist's mind' but as a *literary* construct. While the narrator draws heavily on archival investigation, much of it apparently executed in person, the three sections of the text which address the history of the New World are, by contrast, presented as treatments for plays or films. The point seems to be not simply that Trinidad's aboriginal past can now only be imagined, or that history has to be narrativised and to that extent inevitably begins to leak into the domain of the fictive. It's a reminder that the material history of the New World has been shaped by fable to an extraordinary extent, from Raleigh's feverish imaginings of El Dorado to Francisco Miranda's Enlightenment dream of a just new society – fantasies which have their analogues in contemporary revolutionary projects of the kind described in 'New Clothes.'

The generic 'undecidability' of Naipaul's text suggests some contiguity with de Man's conception of the theoretical impossibility of separating fictional from non-fictional discourses, figured in his image (*Autobiography* 266) of the 'whirligig' of 'revolving doors' between them. Above all the *unnamed* narrating persona (we can use 'V.S. Naipaul' only in inverted commas) clearly complicates Auto/biography Studies' traditional understanding of the genre as characterised by a 'pact' between author and reader, whereby the latter can assume, as Philippe Lejeune puts it (*The Autobiographical Contract* 192), that the author (whose name designates a real person), protagonist and narrator are identical. This is not, however, simply a philosophical conundrum which might find in Naipaul evidence of typically postmodern epistemological doubts. Rather it primarily emphasizes the essentially 'absent' nature of postcolonial Caribbean identity as a result of the erasure or disruption of foundational affiliations under colonialism. Thus the aetiology of Naipaul's thinking is radically different to de Man's and must be sought instead in the concrete historical-cultural processes of what, symptomatically, he consistently describes as the *New World*. Caribbean subjectivity is, in this context, represented as caught on several levels between the 'real' and the 'fictive,' domains which cannot, in any case, be easily distinguished in themselves.

Such ideas have important implications for the thematics of autobiographical subjectivity. In the first place, the generic fracturing, even incoherence, of some postcolonial autobiography helps challenge the model of unified Selfhood which, as feminist critics argue, is traditionally linked in Auto/biography Studies to generic coherence and integrity, as well as the consolidation of the Authority of patriarchy and class hierarchy. Conversely, the unstable mixing of genres evident in writers like Naipaul supports strategic arguments about the intrinsic hybridity of postcolonial subjectivity, leading Linda Anderson (*Autobiography* 115) to observe, in a seeming yet necessary paradox, that 'postcolonial identity is a contradiction in terms.'

If the above discussion illustrates in part what is distinctive about postcolonial autobiography's troubling of the categories of factual / referential and fictional / imaginative in relation to western postmodernism, it, also, however, may require modification of some claims made about western women's autobiography. To the extent that the traffic between non-fiction and fiction in Naipaul's autobiographical writings anticipates that of Caribbean women authors like Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid, for example, gender may not be, as claimed by critics like Françoise Lionnet (*Of Mangoes and Maroons* 321ff) and Leigh Gilmore (*Autobiographics* 100ff), the prime factor in respect of this aspect of those writers' 'autobiographics.' Instead, explanations may perhaps more convincingly sought by contextualising all three writers' work in the first instance within problematics entailed by their Caribbean culture of origin.

Anti-linearity in postcolonial autobiography

Until the advent of postmodernism and feminism, the integrity of autobiography as a genre rested as much on certain 'internal' rules as its thematic foci or external boundaries. Pre-eminent among these was the requirement for coherent (and usually chronological) unfolding of the life described. This was largely based on the presumption that the Subject should be demonstrated to progressively achieve the sovereign self-understanding which allows pattern and coherence to be retrospectively imposed on the chaotic contingency of lived experience. This was guaranteed above all by the all-important convention of what Georges Gusdorf (*Conditions and Limits* 43) calls 'fine logical and rational order' in representing the development of the protagonist's subjectivity and identity.

In the view of increasing numbers of critics in the 1980s, such positions are clearly relative, because gendered. Thus Estelle Jelinek, widely regarded as inaugurating the feminist revision of Auto/biography Studies, argued (*Women's Autobiography* 17) that the 'harmony and orderliness [and] unidirectionality' prized by male colleagues - and most of the writers they studied - 'betokens a faith in the continuity of [...] their [male] self-images.' According to Jelinek, because of the different nature of women's subjectivity, partly enforced by 'the multi-dimensionality of women's roles,' their autobiography is often 'disconnected, fragmentary, or organised into self-contained

units.’ (*Women’s Autobiography* 17-20) Her argument is clearly open to charges of essentialism, if not, indeed, the reinscription of patriarchal stereotype; nonetheless, versions of it recur in subsequent feminist criticism, which consistently identifies anti-linearity as a distinctive feature of much women’s autobiography.

Comparable claims could, however, be made about a good range of postcolonial autobiography. As has been seen, the fragmented structure of *A Way in the World* challenges conventional ideas of development and coherence in the narrativisation of the Subject. Once more Fanon’s *Black Skin* provides a template for later writers in this regard, being highly non-linear, indeed at times impressionistic, in its structure, qualities announced on the first page. However, even in female postcolonial autobiography, the explanation for anti-linearity can’t be supposed to derive simply from supposed differences in postcolonial women’s psychic make-up, or in their socialisation, let alone a desire to imitate the narrative experimentations of western postmodernism. Rather anti-linearity across the range of the sub-genre registers not only (once more) the fragmenting experience of colonialism and its legacies but also, in certain instances, recourse to local narrative templates which are drawn on to (re)constitute postcolonial subjectivity.

To illustrate this argument, one might examine a challenging recent text, Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days* (1989), the difficulties of which derive substantially from its anti-linear qualities. Despite her long residence in the U.S., where she is a Professor of English at Yale, home of the most celebrated school of deconstructionists in the Anglophone world, it’s clear that these textual qualities derive in substantial measure from Suleri’s affiliation to two ‘indigenous’ cultural traditions of (self-)representation. The first is the heritage of Mughal miniature painting, first alluded to during the text’s meditation on the run-up to Independence in 1947, when the prospect of Partition required the realignment of ‘spatial perspective’ with ‘something of the maniacal neatness of a Mughal miniaturist.’ (*Meatless Days* 74) Suleri was well acquainted with such work. The main museum in her home city of Lahore (the capital of the Mughal empire under Akbar), to which *Meatless Days* refers on more than one occasion, boasts an important collection of such ‘miniatures.’¹ Together with individual and group portraits, the collection includes several self-portraits, typifying the range of Mughal painting as a whole.

As Suleri’s initial allusion suggests, Mughal painting offers lessons not just about scale (hers is a very short if sometimes almost indigestibly rich one), but narrative perspective and structure. In the essentially two-dimensional arrangement of one example in the Lahore Museum, ‘The Construction of a Palace,’ for example, there’s no hierarchy of ‘background’ and ‘foreground’ which orders the visual ‘reading’ of the work. Consequently, as Milo Beach asserts (*Mughal and Rajput* 18) is typical of the genre to

¹ There exists a catalogue of ‘miniatures’ on display in the museum in 1976, the year Suleri left for the U.S. See *Miniature Paintings on Display in the Lahore Museum: Mughal and Rajasthani Schools* (Lahore: Lahore Museum, 1976.)

which it belongs, ‘no single...episode dominates. Visual interest is evenly distributed over the entire surface of the work.’ A comparable claim might be made about *Meatless Days* at both the micrological (linguistic) and macrological (thematic) levels. In terms of the latter, in contrast to traditional autobiography, it does not ‘foreground’ the progressive development of a singular privileged Self, in relation to which events and other persons are arranged as ‘background.’ Instead, ‘interest’ is ‘evenly distributed’ between Suleri herself, family members and the seemingly inexorable decline of the new nation. A second analogue of the two-dimensional quality of Mughal painting is evident in Suleri’s text. In ‘The Construction of a Palace,’ the eye is not led to ‘read’ its parts in any particular order. Similarly, with the possible exception of the ‘framing’ chapters, Suleri’s ‘tales’ could be read in any order without materially affecting their meaning. In her later piece of autobiography, *Boys will be Boys*, Suleri confesses that ‘my instincts have never led me to chronology.’ (*Boys Will Be Boys* 38) This is reflected in *Meatless Days* not only in the fact the chapter primarily devoted to Suleri’s mother (who was first to die) comes after the one devoted to her sister Ifat, but its characteristically recursive temporality.

The anti-linear quality of Suleri’s writing is reinforced by a second important non-western narrative model. This is the *ghazal*, often considered to be the pre-eminent form in classical Urdu literature, which D.J. Matthews and Christopher Shackle describe (1972: 1) simply as ‘a short love-poem in which the two halves of the first couplet and the second line of the remaining couplets rhyme.’ Suleri demonstrates close familiarity with the tradition, and indeed has written ghazals herself; but she reserves her greatest admiration for Ghālib (1797-1869). In a rapturous account of her discovery of him, *Meatless Days* (99, 82) hails Ghālib as ‘the master poet’ and he is similarly praised (*Boys Will Be Boys* 72, 114) in *Boys*. He, more than any other single source perhaps, inspires some of the most distinctive and challenging paratactic qualities of *Meatless Days*.²

The *ghazal* has much in common with the tradition of Mughal painting, not least in being another art-form in which issues of scale are crucial. More important, in the present context, is characteristically fragmentary structure. Aijaz Ahmad (*Ghazals of Ghālib* xvi) suggests that despite its apparent uniformity and coherence the form can be highly discontinuous at the thematic level:

The ghazal is a poem made up of couplets, each couplet wholly independent of any other in meaning and complete in itself as a unit of thought, emotion and communication. No two couplets have to be related to each other in any way whatever except formally [...] and yet they can be parts of a single poem.

² Like the opening of Fanon’s *Black Skin*, the highly ‘poetic’ quality of *Meatless Days* further offers a partial challenge to the conventional view that autobiography is a prose form. See Lejeune, (*The Autobiographical Contract* 192). Equally, Suleri’s description of her text as ‘these quirky little tales’ (*Meatless Days* 156) suggests a desire to trouble the distinctions which Lejeune draws between autobiography and fiction.

Consequently, Ralph Russell argues (*Getting to Know* 287), the *ghazal*'s 'close unity of form' can stand 'in startling contrast with a complete disunity of content.'

One might argue that like the *ghazal*, *Meatless Days* is composed of what Suleri calls (*Meatless Days* 76) 'tiny autonomies.' 'Excellent Things in Women,' the opening narrative, was conceived first and published independently³ and the remaining chapters stand as almost equally self-sufficient entities. Within each, moreover, thematic transitions are often abrupt, even startling. Suleri reflects ruefully (*Meatless Days* 73) on her 'merely indifferent talent for construction,' but as a comment about her portrait of Tom suggests (*Meatless Days* 37), there is art in this apparent randomness: 'Perhaps I should have been able to bring those bits together, but such a narrative was not available to me, not after what I knew of storytelling.' For a narrative about the fracturing of both her family and Pakistan itself, as well as the partial erasure of her 'original' identity as a consequence of diaspora, Suleri's fragmented, paratactic mode seems artfully appropriate.

If *Meatless Days* provides a particularly striking example of anti-linear qualities in postcolonial autobiography which derive from long-established indigenous templates, it is far from alone in this respect. Perhaps the most widespread source of anti-linearity in the sub-genre is the oral tradition, with its characteristically regressive and digressive narrative movement. Its influence is apparent from the earliest precursor forms of postcolonial autobiography. Thus the anti-linear elements of *The History of Mary Prince* amply corroborate the assertion (3) that it 'was taken down from Mary's own lips.' In texts as geo-culturally diverse as Sindiwe Magona's *To My Children's Children* (1990) and Isabel Allende's *Paula* (1995), the oral tradition plays a crucial role in the narrative construction of autobiographical subjectivity.

Such templates have wider implications for the thematics of autobiographical subjectivity in the postcolonial sphere. Not only do they 'indigenise' the individual identities concerned, sometimes making them geo-culturally, sometimes even ethnically specific, they also at times invoke quite different conceptions of Selfhood to what is the norm in western autobiography. Thus the oral tradition is intrinsically dialogical in character, constructing a Self which is intrinsically more relational than is the case with the characteristically monadic, autonomous Subject of the western male canon, at least. As Lionnet suggests (*Of Mangoes and Maroons* 324), furthermore, the hybridisation of narrative templates and of former colonial languages in postcolonial life-writing undermines the traditional western model of unified autobiographical subjectivity by foregrounding 'the double consciousness of the postcolonial, bilingual and bicultural writer.'

³ Email from Suleri, April 8, 2008.

Conclusion

The strategic implications of such revisions of established poetics can be measured in relation to the long critical tradition which sees the genre as a specifically western form. Thus Gusdorf's canonical *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, insists (29) that the genre 'expresses a concern peculiar to Western man' and that it is 'the late product of a specific civilisation.' Soon afterwards Roy Pascal (*Design and Truth* 22) argued thus: 'It is beyond my scope to suggest why autobiography does not come into being outside Europe, and the existence of a work such as Bâbur's memoirs of the sixteenth century, which would occupy a significant place in the history of autobiography had it belonged to Europe, makes one hesitate to generalise. But there remains no doubt that autobiography is essentially European.' This seems transparently circular: if Bâbur was European, we could call his text autobiography; conversely, one supposes, if his text was autobiography, then Babur would necessarily be European. More recently, Richard Coe's examination of the sub-genre of childhood autobiography, which he labels 'the Childhood,' observes (*When the Grass* 40) that 'the Childhood is a genre which presupposes a sophisticated culture. It is inconceivable among primitives [...] It demands a sense of form, and the intellectual ability to adapt the ill-balanced and misshapen material of experience to the harmony of literary expression without overmuch distortion of the original truth [...] It demands self-knowledge; it demands also the most delicately graded sense of values relating the individual to the community.'

One might infer from such pronouncements that all autobiography in the non-western world is at best a belated and mimic cultural activity, which exists in a necessarily secondary, if not dependent, relation to western templates and traditions. Thus, in discussing Gandhi's *An Autobiography* (1926-8), Gusdorf (*Conditions and Limits* 29) argues somewhat ominously that the genre has 'been of good use in Man's [i.e. Western Man's] systematic conquest of the universe' and in the course of such conquest, it has 'communicated to men [sic] of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that is not their own. When Gandhi tells his own story, he is using Western means to defend the East.' Equally, Coe claims (*When the Grass* 40) of 'the Childhood' that 'even in the contemporary Third World, it emerges only in imitation of more culturally advanced models.'

Such views have been challenged in various ways in more recent critical history. An increasing body of research points to the existence of a' bical writings outside the West which go back to antiquity. Indeed, as long ago as the turn of the twentieth century, Georg Misch (1907) studied a range of non-European autobiographical texts in classical times. More recently, Richard Bowring (1984) has examined autobiographical writing in the Far East dating back to the ninth Century CE. Equally, Margot Badran (1992) and Kristen Brustad *et al.* (2001) have each identified the existence of long-standing and vigorous autobiographical traditions in the Arab world which predate contact with the West.

My critique of the positions taken by Gusdorf, Pascal and Coe has taken rather a different approach, partly because have surveyed a much more recent period, beginning in the late eighteenth century; and partly because the body of work I engage with is clearly influenced by contact with Europe, most obviously insofar as most of it written in European languages, one of the prime instruments of colonialism. However, there is at least an implicit link with these more historically-oriented critics insofar as what partly animates all such work is a sense that western Autobiography Studies' failure to properly recognise alternative traditions derives not simply from ignorance, or lack of interest, but from narrow, if not plainly ethnocentric, conceptions of what the autobiographical Self consists of, how it should be written. Above all, I have sought on the present occasion to overcome the false opposition more or less explicitly established in some quarters between formalist literary-critical analysis and political criticism. Each can – and needs to – complement each other when any branch of postcolonial literature is under question. In the context of the ideological meanings ascribed to the poetics autobiography by some of its leading western critics, the challenges posed by postcolonial autobiography are *simultaneously* formal and political in nature.

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