

Literophile

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Editorial

Conflict in itself is an unending, cyclical process that has marked most of world history for as far back as any historian would care to go, and remains ever so strangely a part of the human condition. A crucial reminder of the same is that this year, which commemorates the centenary of the beginning of World War I, will also be marked in history for conflicts. The events in Israel/Palestine, conflict in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, the Syrian Crisis; unnumbered killings in Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which face an uncertain future; the ongoing underlying animosities in Russia and Ukraine; the drone attacks in Waziristan; the continuing menace of al-Qaida, Boko Haram, Islamic State (ISIS), the resurgent riots in India and border insurgencies, and much more. This is, as António Guterres says, “a world where peace is dangerously in deficit”. This statement, along with the report that has announced the forced displacement of over 50 million people for the first time since World War II leave us in an uncomfortably blindfolded position.

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In such a situation, the cultural influence of experiences such as these, magnified during and after the World Wars, finds expression in various outlets including literary and visual forms of art, all of them seem to suggest a dangerous inference – that war and violence hold a significant role in the shaping of human imagination and inter-personal identity. Hence, what Art brings into the equation is a sense of relief and a desperate attempt at making sense of the breaks in the understanding of life and the world around us. Art bridges the gap between experience and consequence. The need to observe and to record the everyday life during war; the need to form a resistance and challenge the dominance of autocrats; to provoke and to question while observing and reflecting in order to deal with the trauma associated with conflict in all forms; to aid in the re-writing of histories and counter histories, and in a manner of effort (whether optimistic, pessimistic or completely detached) which asserts the need to find and restore peace, these are the reasons why artists venture into the gaping hollows of conflict. Art history, music, literary masterpieces, numerous poems, propaganda writings and theatre, protest performances, radical writings, and even classical epics like *Mahabharata* and *Iliad*, all hold accounts, voices and horribly beautiful descriptions of what war is and how it affects the human condition. What must be reflected upon is the depth of impressionism, philosophical and realist collisions and the pathos of humanity that go hand in hand with the idea of sudden (vs. planned) conflict.

The relationship that art holds with conflict can best be seen through the works of official wartime painters who brought forth the idea of the void, the mechanization of the world and the fragmentation and darkness that had seeped into the psyche of the everyday man. What is absolutely definite is that art continuously stimulates new debates and fresh reflection as artists strive to make work that has powerful agency with the intent of provoking a response.

From the inspiring music of Bhupen Hazarika that lifted an ongoing curfew during the Naga Rebellion, to the Rock and Roll revolution that gave birth to a revolution in the Eastern Bloc; from war-time memoirs and poetry written by the soldiers often lay bare the insider’s experience to counter-memorials and other sculptures of protest which impact the psyche, pushing one away from the Homeric idea of glorious war towards its consequences, all stand as examples of the power of art and its impact on national and international issues of unrest and conflict. This year, as we commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the First World War, it becomes imperative to look back at the volume of art work, both literary and otherwise, to be able to assess the curious case of the nation, and what it means to be at war, to be alive during that time, or be faced with the threat of one. With the numerous wars, protests, rebellions and revolutions that have been witnessed by the unforgiving memory of artists over the years since 1914, this issue of *Literophile* presents analyses of works dealing with the idea of war, both at the individual and social levels, to be able to understand what makes War both condemnable, as well as unavoidable – if history is to be gone by.

Editor

“A mile from where you chatter, somebody screams”: Derek Mahon and the Play of Perspective

Writing prose about poetry, especially prose that is academically critical in nature and not a spontaneous overflow of interpretive emotions, is one of the most daunting tasks possible for a student of literature. The task becomes doubly difficult when one is dealing with an elusive poet like Derek Mahon who is a virtuoso in the evasive arts of pluralizing meaning. This is why I feel that one must, at the very outset, state in brief terms one’s position on poetry, how it functions, and what it does in the web of semiotics in the world; this will aid me in forming a rough schema with which I will contextualize this paper’s approach to its content.

This paper’s position on poetry stems from the idea that poetry is an elaborate meditation on the complexities of human phenomenology and linguistic signification. Poetry is the world folding back upon itself to showcase the vagaries of sights, sounds, smells, ideas, emotions, fragments, memory, creativity, society, history, politics and a plethora of other things that constantly interact and react in the beakers of our minds. It creatively organizes and formalizes these elements not simply to produce a mimetic representation of what “is” (because there is no stable, singular, objective “is” in the (post)modern world) but to bring out a creative insight into how a particular ‘that which “is”’ functions to create an order of things and how one actively moulds it through poetry. Art in general is a simultaneous, interconnected process of phenomenological introspection and a creative transformation of the order of things. Poetry looks at the world from a playful, constructivist rather than a rigid, essentialist point of view.

Derek Mahon is a poet who is all too aware of this. His whole world is a stage, a painting, a construction site from where he flits in and out of at various vantage points in a masterly poetic dance. Accordingly, the central kernel around which this paper is woven are the ways in which ‘perspective’ plays in the poetry of Mahon. The idea is to analyse the various vantage points of poet, poetic subjects and readers that are present through a heteroglossia¹ of voices within the poems and are used as different focal points through which the phenomenological stimulus of the poems is looked at. My argument ultimately is that Mahon creates an ever shifting kaleidoscope of perspectives through various techniques in his poetry in order to grant access to a similar worldview of ever shifting perspectives to his readers; a worldview that is a collection of evolving, freewheeling, unmoored points of view. The poems aim to sensitize readers to an idea of relativism through a play of perspective. At one level, this is an attempt to make orthodox Ulstermen see beyond the rigid, sectarian divides of Northern Ireland and to deal with the conflicts that this topos has been a victim to over the ages. That is however never the ultimate destination of Mahon’s work which resonates way beyond into much larger existential concerns. The theme of conflict transformation is nevertheless one of the major chords that echo in his work, a chord that this paper attempts to tease out.

I

I was first struck with Mahon’s preoccupation with the idea of perspective when I looked at his interest in the visual arts. The most important aspect of this art form is the concept of perspective since it is primarily built around the idea of visuality. At the very obvious level, his ekphrastic poems like “The Hunt by Night”, “Girls on a Bridge”, “Courtyards in Delft” are his interpretations of particular art works by a hugely varying spectrum of painters. A painting is a carefully thought out interpretation of a collection of visual signs gathered from the world. These poems showcase an agglutination of three layers – first is the visual content-in-itself, second is the painter’s interpretation of it and third is Mahon’s poetic coating over these two layers. An intermingling of multiple perspectives thus forms an agon in these poems.

Mahon’s engagement with art creates an interesting poetic event. Richard York notes that in publishing poems like these, Mahon expects his readers to be visually sensitive and observant of the various intricacies of perspective, light, colors, shadows, textures and frames, all of which contribute to the production of meaning in art (York 132). Even if one isn’t really an art scholar and is simply coming to Mahon’s poems, in order to understand them one will inevitably have to spend some time with the paintings he references. The experience of reading these poems is like walking in an art gallery with Mahon as a tour guide doling out cryptic poetic interpretations to the reader who must work his way through this maze like exercise of perspective building.

A detailed analysis of these ‘ekphrastic poems’, no matter how tempting, is beyond the scope of this paper. I will however mention a few brief inferences that are related to the larger arguments that this paper will illustrate. The most famous of these poems is the one based on Uccello’s c.1470 painting *Hunt by Night*. This painting is considered to be a watershed moment in the development of perspective, depth and dimensionality in Western art during the early years of the Renaissance. The painting literally showcases a move from two dimensions to three as the paltry two dimensional hunters gradually start gaining depth while they move towards the central darkness of the forest in the painting where the alleged prey is hiding. Perspective grows within the folds of this painting and Mahon’s poem crystallizes an entire history of art around this motif of hunting in visual representations as it charts its growth from cave paintings. “flickering shades...in a cave”, to Uccello’s aristocratic hunters of the fifteenth century who are “rampant to

pageantry” and finally to similar scenes sanitised on nursery walls in the modern world where “ancient fears mutated to play/horses to rocking horses/tamed and framed’ (Mahon 133).

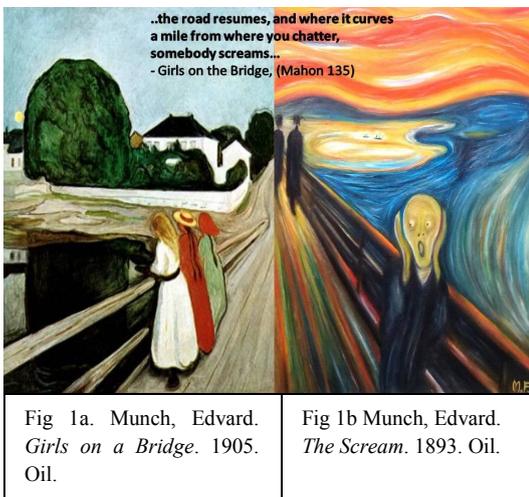


Fig 1a. Munch, Edvard. *Girls on a Bridge*. 1905. Oil.

Fig 1b Munch, Edvard. *The Scream*. 1893. Oil.

York notes that a juxtaposition of multiple perspectives takes place in all his other ekphrastic poems as well (135); De Hooch’s *Courtyards in Delft* focuses on the interplay of the perspective of the outdoor with the indoor while the poem “Girls on a Bridge” very wittingly places two paintings by Munch; *Girls on a Bridge* and his extremely popular *Scream* side by side (see Fig 1) due to both paintings sharing a similar setting on bridges. “A mile from where you chatter / somebody screams” (Mahon 135) creates an intense tension between the playful chatter of the girls in the first painting and the existential angst epitomized by the scream in the latter one. Mahon creates a spatial proximity between the two scenes to create an intense interaction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness in the interplay of language with a supra-linguistic scream. It also points towards the need for individuals on their separate bridges preoccupied with their particular situations to try and become aware of things happening on parallel bridges around them. All of this is tangentially connected to his meditations on the Irish conflict of course and is also broadly a part of his larger interest in the Ovidian play of perspective and metamorphic shiftiness.

The form of these painting-poems is also very interesting; York feels they represent a throbbing, pulsating body with its natural ebb and flows (136). In each stanza, the lines first gradually lengthen and then shorten, like a wave form. The whole idea that Mahon brings to his audience time and again is that art is not static but is rather an “event” which is organic, open and semantically fluid. Artist, art, audience and context are created and recreated each time the event of art occurs. The form of the poem must be such that it can accommodate this performative metamorphosis that art continuously goes through. This is also why Mahon constantly revises and edits his poems over time. He resists any form of essentialism to seep into his work. A play of perspective can only occur in such scenarios where the event is not stable, static and fixed.

II

To see how the idea of perspective developed in Mahon’s poetry, I tried to zone in on its development in Mahon’s psychobiography and found that each moment that he considers pivotal in his life as a poet and as a human being involved a radical shift in perspective not just mentally but also physically, in terms of the spaces he was interacting with.

As is not surprising, his childhood in a Protestant Belfast family in the 1950s involved him being immersed in the Protestant-Unionist rhetoric. In an interview given to Eamonn Grennan in the *Paris Review* he says that “as I went through my teens I saw them with my own eyes. A part of my visual experience was Election Day in Belfast, those lorries full of Unionist supporters, the polling booths...I didn’t look at these people as terrifying B-Specials – they were my family. I had an uncle who was a sergeant in the B-Specials. My cousin Conacht and I used to play with his unloaded revolver in their house” (Grennan).

Certain shifts in perspective however ensured that Mahon did not stray towards the sectarianism that his habitus was leading him towards. He says that as a child he started observing objects a lot. He had no siblings, his father was a devout follower of the protestant work ethic at the shipyard in Belfast, and his mother was busy with housework most of the times. This is when Mahon became a “strange child with a taste for verse” (Grennan 96). Instead of being involved with other humans as a young child, he started observing animation in the objects around him: “the way the light falls from the window onto the kitchen tap and interacts with the cold water” (Grennan). To disconnect oneself from human community and to start connecting with the inanimate world by locating animation in it is a really unique kind of perspective shift. The next shift from narrow minded sectarianism came in secondary school where he says that:

I first began in that teenage way to develop what you might call a political awareness. This was helped by...an uncle who...had been at sea in the Merchant Navy...He was a sort of bachelor-student, the kind of man who wanted to read literature...He was a self-taught man, a left-wing autodidact...He had quite an effect on me at one point, prompting me to become conscious of the political situation (Grennan).

This uncle’s travels away from Northern Ireland granted him perspective, made him look at home in a different critical light which he was able to transfer on to young Derek.

This is when he started to look at religion not from a believer’s point of view, but from that of a critical observer on the outside who realizes the whole thing to be a performance or a role-play, which is what allows him to easily dramatise the persona of a devout Protestant in the scathing satire he writes of religious fervor in “Ecclesiastes”. When asked about his family’s relationship with religion, he says, “There was a certain amount of churchgoing, although

they went for the look of the thing – it was expected that you would show your face in church once in a while. They were serious about being respectable and being seen to do the right thing, but they weren't really serious church people." (Grennan).

The major breakthrough in Mahon's perspective came when he himself left Belfast and went to Trinity in Dublin to study along with Michael Longley: "I was bewildered by the place at first, bewildered by Trinity. I thought that Dublin was beautiful...It was a happy alternative to Belfast. In fact, some of us who went down together from the North developed anti-Northern jokes among ourselves" (Grennan). They started a literary magazine together at Trinity called *Atlantis* whose manifesto read: "Our aim is to see Ireland in an international perspective, to lift its drowsy eyelids and disturb it into a sense of relationship and awareness" (Grennan).

Even at these early stages, one notices a radically different cosmopolitan artistic position in Mahon from the Yeatsian or Heaney-esque model of parochial, ruralist Irish poetry. Elmer Andrews notes that Mahon would fall more into the Louis Macneice-ian model of being a tourist in one's own country that is emblematic of the condition of modern man (Andrews 7). Mahon gradually learnt to let go of the centeredness that earlier poets vied for in terms of their voice being the voice of a poet-vates or a guiding prophet like Homer or Milton. Mahon in fact mocks that "wretched rage for order" (47). He has come to terms with the lack of order in the world and has changed gears towards finding a system where instead of a singularity of order, a heteroglossia of voices can be accommodated.

This heteroglossia first started to emerge when his shifting to Dublin led to the development of a new voice: "Of course, there was a struggle going on within myself...between a surly Belfast working-class thing and a...debonair [Dublin one]...there was a clash in me between the one and the other...In those early poems there'd be one man on one page and a totally different person on the next page" (Grennan).

The ultimate distancing happened when Mahon moved out of Ireland completely and went to stay in New York. This is what led to the Hudson Letter which is centered on the theme of homelessness. Mahon says that "...my Hudson Letter topic...turned out to be...the whole sexual-metaphysical homeless ache we live with as a species. I could see my boring little provincial home-fixation as, paradoxically, one of the big themes" (Grennan).

If one notices a pattern here, Mahon has visually been zooming out first from his family, then from Belfast into Dublin, then out of Ireland and finally into New York. His move from a sectarian setting to a preoccupation with a cosmopolitan existential ache was possible only because of the perspective building caused by this visual panning out. From within Belfast, Mahon could perhaps have only seen Ulster from the fractured perspective of Protestant Unionism. It is when he moves out that he starts to see Northern Ireland as a totality instead of seeing it through Catholic and Protestant partialities. From New York, the homeward pull is never towards the Catholic side or the Protestant side, but towards Ireland as a whole.

This motif of distanced viewing to gain a panoramic perspective is repeated time and again in his poems. In "Spring in Belfast", he says that "We could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill" (15). The emphasis on "*all*" here is Mahon's own and the hill in question is the Cave hill of Belfast, the idea being that if the Protestants and Catholics of Belfast could see their city as a totality from the distance of the hills, they would perhaps move beyond the partial views of the city they get from their respectively orange and green tinted windows. A similar visually distant panning out is suggested in "Derry Morning" where Mahon ends his mournful elegy to the city with the lines "A Russian freighter bound for home / Mourns to the city in its gloom" (99)

Thus, in his journey through the ages Mahon engages in a constant unmooring of the self till a point when he simply does not feel anchored to any particular centre at all. This zooming out ultimately allows him to focus on cosmic, existential issues rather than being preoccupied with earthly, sectarian ones. He carries on in the interview, saying:

It's practically my subject, my theme: solitude and community;...But it is important for me to be on the edge looking in. I've been inside, I've spent lots of time inside. Now again, I appear to be outside; perhaps I'll be inside once again...What I did was to reject the world I was shown, though I later came back to it in various ways. But I went off on this solipsistic trip, on which I in some sense still am. So all of those dedications (the huge number of poems he dedicates to people) amount to the creation of a new family (Grennan).

III

In this final section, I would like to briefly examine one poem by Mahon to illustrate the point about plurality of perspectives that I have been talking about.

"As It Should Be"

We hunted the mad bastard
Through bog, moorland, rock, to the starlit west

And gunned him down in a blind yard
Between ten sleeping lorries
And an electricity generator.

Let us hear no idle talk
Of the moon in the Yellow River:
The air blows softer since his departure.

Since his tide burial during school hours
Our children have known no bad dreams.
Their cries echo lightly along the coast.

This is as it should be.
They will thank us for it when they grow up
To a world with method in it (49).

At the surface level, there is a single authoritative voice of a mob here which has just carried out an execution. This singularity is crushed in the poem through various uses of irony that Mahon brings in. The first two lines paint a picture of heroic proportions which would seem to romanticize and legitimize this adventurous hunting done in a natural setting “we hunted the mad bastard / through bog, moorland, rock to the starlit west”; however the subsequent two lines which represent the actual act of killing completely de-romanticize this image with a focus on its absentminded, mechanical brutality: “and gunned him down in a blind yard / between ten sleeping lorries”².

At various points in the poem this collective mob voice seems to be reassuring its own self about what it has done, which reveals fractures within the seemingly certain tone that otherwise pervades the poem: “Let us hear no idle talk...This is as it should be...A world with method in it.” The cyclical logic of the crux of this voice’s argument “This is as it should be” dismantles its authority, while people who wish for a “world with method in it” are mocked by Mahon as having an obsessive “wretched rage for order” in other poems.

The other presences in the poem are the “mad bastard” and the “children” whose voice we never get to hear but whose absence nonetheless makes itself felt. On a first reading, one tends to get seduced with the rhetoric of the mob’s voice but on a few more readings one starts to question who this mad bastard is and whether he/she/it has actually done anything to deserve death. The children for whom this whole exercise is allegedly being carried out also puncture the authority of the mob as the mob only assumes their gratitude in the future for what it has done. It is absolutely uncertain whether such gratitude will ever come or not. This mob voice attempts to work as a centripetal force in the poem to create a monolithic narrative, but Mahon’s use of irony as well as the paradoxical ‘absent presence’ of the vantage points of the children and the mad bastard act as centrifugal forces which overpower that voice and result in a heteroglossia and a pluralization of meaning in the poem.

What this play of perspective does is that it leaves the reader anchorless. The poetic event created here is the arrangement of signs without one but various threads running through them, connecting/disconnecting them in multiple ways, defying a reader’s wretched rage for a singularity of order. They unsettle the reader and force one to focus on the very elemental process of semiosis itself. The play of perspective in his poetry alerts us to the event of poetry, the coming together of author, text, context and reader to engage in a process of meaning making. Due to the bucket loads of irony and heteroglossia that he drops all over this event, the whole thing becomes too wet and fluid for any clotting of perspective to take place. At the meta-level then, this forces one to question all other forms of rigid opinions and certainties that one follows in one’s symbolic order.

His poems drive in the idea that any certainties of perspective – Catholic, Nationalist, Republican, Democrat, Right or Left wing – are only a particular way of looking at the world. There are a myriad other ways of doing the same. Mahon wants to rattle against the stubbornness of the position in “Spring in Belfast”, “there is a perverse pride in being on the side/of the fallen angels and refusing to get up” (15), with the Ovidian manifesto in “Heraclitus in Rivers”, “Nobody steps into the same river twice / The same river is never the same...Similarly, your changing metabolism / Means that you are no longer you...the idea of language, All these things will pass away in time.” (105)

Through engaging in a poetic process in the event of poetry either as poet or reader, one becomes sensitive to such an idea of perspectivism and the complex webs of symbolic orders that envelop our planet. When such a withering away of certainties occurs, one is faced with the overwhelming question of forming an order of one’s own. One must hope that this new order has the possibility of being a better one; an order that is not created in what Sartre calls *mauvaise foi* or bad faith. One hopes that it will have the possibility of evolution, a possibility of humans growing up and learning to live without feeling a dire need to kill other humans who simply do not share their order of things. That, I think is how Mahon’s vision over his poetic oeuvre tries to deal with the Northern Irish conflict.

Notes -

¹ I broadly use Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia in language as a tussle between centripetal and centrifugal forces (Bakhtin 12) as a theoretical tool to unpack Mahon's creation of a plurality of perspectives.

² This simultaneous glorification plus undercutting is a typical Mahon move seen in various poems. In "Glengormely", the first line, "Wonders are many and none is more wonderful than man", gets suddenly undercut by the mocking tone of "who has tamed the terrier and trimmed the hedge" (16). Similarly, in "Derry Morning", Mahon writes beautiful elegiac verses on a town destroyed by rioting, "the mist clears and the cavities / grow black in the rubble city's broken mouth" (99); but in "Rage for Order" he mocks his own poetic self in a riot setting by saying: "Somewhere beyond / the scorched gable end / And the burnt out / Buses there is a poet indulging his / wretched rage for order" (47).

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When The Capital Bled: Reconstructing the Anti-Sikh Pogrom in Delhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi

The year of 1984 has been one of the most turbulent ones in the history of India. It saw Operation Blue Star, assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the anti-Sikh pogrom. It was not something that affected my life in a big way. The only thing I was told while growing up was that Indira Gandhi was a very powerful lady and India's first woman prime minister. Instinctively, every 31st October, when there used to be a full page tribute to her, it used to inspire me.

Some specials in *Outlook* and *India Today* put her death in context. In the age of internet, I came face to face with more 'specials' online remembering Indira Gandhi's assassination and its aftermath. But it was Amitav Ghosh's story "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi" that first introduced me to the details of November 1984.

History textbooks do not mention this and newspapers and magazines have specials that glorify Indira Gandhi mostly. There are some that explain the massacre (that I found during the course of my research for this essay) but nothing explains the gravity of those three days. Possibly, this absence is ensured in order to make sure no one community is instigated further because of a troublesome past; or because the massacre was extremely politically motivated. Nothing can be said for sure but what is clear is that this event's history is available only in bits and pieces.

This is where memory steps in and allows us to create a parallel history that resists its obliteration from the official history. Literature coupled with oral history and people's memories brings out the silences that exist in the official history.

*

"I have done what I had to do. Now you do what you have to do" (Tully 2).
– Beant Singh [after assassinating Indira Gandhi].

What happened in 1984 was a culmination of the events that started when the demand for a separate Sikh state was made. 1977 saw the creation and subsequent rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Bhindranwale was a violent fundamentalist whose focus was the establishment of Khalsa Raj. His speeches were charged and fired up the youth in Punjab who believed him as he spoke in the rustic language that appealed to them. Khushwant Singh, Indian novelist, politician, lawyer and journalist, in his book *My Bleeding Punjab*, points out how "Bhindranwale not only preached hatred, he also preached violence" (Singh 52).

The period starting from 1981 marked a time of heavy turbulence in Punjab. Terrorism, as it has been called in all the books which have accounted it, was rampant in the region. Mrs. Suvercha Kapoor, whose parents live in Jalandhar, Punjab, recounts the violence in Punjab:

For...three years [from 1981] this militancy in Punjab had gained momentum...I remember on one such trip home [from Delhi to Punjab]...my husband came to see me off at the station and I sat in the train and he got the newspaper for me to read on the way and the headline said that some 200 people killed in the train...and you can imagine my plight, travelling in train. [In Jalandhar], in my mother's house, we could hear gunshots at night...and there were accidents like bomb blasts and shootouts. [There was] this constant fear that something would happen to my father, something would happen to my brother...lips constantly moved in prayer...for three years we lived liked this...¹

On October 6, 1983, President's Rule was promulgated in Punjab but the situation remained the same. Killings and robberies continued on a daily basis and went on till 1984. On 6th June, 1984, the sacred Golden Temple was attacked by the army under Operation Blue Star in order to bring out the terrorists seeking shelter in the temple. It was a long drawn attack damaging the Akal Takht and many other parts of the temple itself. In this attack, Bhindranwale and most of his associates died. Their bodies were strewn all over in the basement of the Akal Takht (Nayar and Singh). The attack outraged Sikhs not only in Punjab but all over the world. Kuldip Nayar and Khushwant Singh write in their book *The Tragedy of Punjab*: "...that the Akal Takht was destroyed made a deep wound in the Sikh psyche; it had been the seat of their Gurus. That it was Bhindranwale who had defiled the seat of their shrine, making it a fortress and the refuge of killers, was forgotten." (Nayar and Singh 127)

That Mrs. Gandhi life was at stake was also well known. She was asked to wear bullet proof jackets and was advised to not have Sikh bodyguards around her. On the morning of 31st October, she stepped out of her home without the bullet proof jacket and as she was walking out of the house into the compound, she was shot dead by her Sikh bodyguards Satwant Singh and Beant Singh. In fact, neither of them were supposed to be on duty that day but they managed to get themselves posted on the nearest security ring of the Prime Minister and assassinated her (Tully).

*

“Khoon ka badla khoon se lengey [We will avenge blood with blood].”
– Angry mobs as they killed Sikhs in Delhi.

It was just after Diwali and Mrs. Ravinder Kaur was serving kheer made out of left over sweets to her father-in-law in their house in Janakpuri when the news of Indira Gandhi’s assassination came. ““The Prime Minister is dead, I don’t want to eat anything,” he said”, recalls Mrs. Kaur. She still managed to force feed him but there was a larger problem looming. “I opened the windows to find a sardarji being beaten up by the mobs. I came inside to tell Daddyji about it but before I could say anything, stones started getting pelted at our house. I locked the doors but they broke our gate and set fire outside in the lawns,” she says.

Mrs. Kaur, along with her family and a few months old daughter, fled to safety after dousing the fire off and settled in their neighbour’s backyard. The mob then proceeded to set their entire house on fire.

Sikh bodyguards had killed the prime minister and Hindus were out on carnage against every Sikh in the city. While the violence was most prevalent in Delhi, other parts of the country were not spared either. Khushwant Singh recalls his own experience, “...I understood what words like pogrom, holocaust and genocide really meant. I was no longer a member of an over-privileged community but of one which was the object of dire hate” (Singh 94).

The loss of lives is estimated to be at 2,717 by the government out of which 2,150 were in Delhi and almost all of them were Sikhs (Tully). However, the unofficial estimate goes up to 6,000 with at least 50,000 Sikhs in refugee camps (Singh).

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“A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.”
– Joseph Stalin

Before delving into how 1984 is remembered through memory, it is important to understand how the carnage has been constructed in public memory through official history. This was the time before breaking news became a phenomenon and only a handful of houses had television sets, the rest getting by through radio or newspapers. Most people heard the news of the assassination from local news agencies and the External Services of the BBC because AIR did not get the permission to air the news until 6 pm.

Doordarshan only showed clips of the Teen Murti Bhawan in Delhi, where the slain prime minister’s body lay. Doordarshan also showed clips of some people at the same place shouting slogans like “Indira Gandhi Amar Rahey” (long live Indira Gandhi) and “khoon ka badla khoon se lengey” (blood will be avenged with blood).

The two human rights NGOs, the People’s Union for Democratic Rights and the People Union for Civil Liberties together published a report *Who are the Guilty?* wherein they laid bare the role of media in the anti-Sikh pogroms. The report elaborates on how the media named the religion of the bodyguards in spite of knowing that naming could aggravate tension:

The first day’s evening bulletins (October 31) brought out by different newspaper establishments stated that there were “two Sikhs and one clean shaven Sikh” among the assailants. The reporters did not clarify whether the news was from official or unofficial sources. Nor was it clear how a “clean shaven Sikh” could be identified as a Sikh. In later reports the next day and the following days, we were told that only two assailants – both Sikhs were involved. What happened to the earlier reported third one? No newspaper has yet followed up the discrepancy...should the media have described the assailants immediately as Sikhs? Given the background of the Punjab situation, such mentioning of a community by name was bound to excite communal passions and inflame communal hatred (*Who Are The Guilty?*).

ABC News, on the other hand, showed extreme mob violence and carnage and gave a somewhat true picture of the city at that time – burning buses and homes, mobs shouting deadly slogans (“blood for blood”) and people being killed and injured – unlike our national news channel (*ABC News*). Even newspapers mentioned how two Sikh bodyguards had gunned the prime minister down. The *Times of India* sub-headline read “Sikh security men pump bullet in chest, abdomen.” The constant reinforcement of the involvement of Sikhs in the assassination and their image as ‘terrorists’ in the past few years erased any love that existed between the two communities.

An ‘official’ rendering of the event gives the timeline of events – assassination, massacre, intervention of the army and the death toll. The event recurs through specials once a year or through the court cases pending on the perpetrators of the violence. The newspaper *Times of India* and magazine *India Today* have special websites that lead us through the timeline of events in 1984 and some personal stories.

That the government did not and still does not want the incident to stay in public memory is evident in the A-rating given to the film *Amu* (2005). Shonali Bose's film *Amu* is about a girl, Kaju, who is back in New Delhi after 15 years. Her mother, Keya Roy has told her that she had been adopted through an agency and lived in a certain village but when Amu goes to the said village she is unable to recollect anything. However, when she goes to another village in Delhi, she gets flashbacks. She starts interrogating her family, the people in the second village and her mother. She is aided by Kabir, a boy she meets at a party whose father is a government servant. She gradually learns about the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom and it is finally revealed that her family died in the massacre after which she was adopted by Keya who saved Kaju, then Amu, after her real mother committed suicide because she could not live with the horror of losing her son and husband. It is also revealed that Kabir's father was also involved in the riots.

In a recent interview with the *Mumbai Mirror*, Shonali Bose said, "[The film] got an 'A' even though it has no sex or violence, because the censor board, under Anupam Kher, argued that young people shouldn't know a history better buried" (Bose). Similarly, Rajiv Gandhi's dismissive remark on the massacre, "when a big tree falls, the Earth about it shakes" (Singh 96), also indicates the state's cavalier attitude towards the massacres, as something of little importance. This attempt at a systematic erasure of history then gives way to the other means through which we can sustain an event – memory.

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"...words are, after all, all we have" (Butalia 360).
– Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence*.

Mr Mohan Lal was returning to his home in Gurgaon from Paschim Vihar on the evening of 1st November when he found out that there was no public transport. "I started at around four pm...[and] did not get a single auto/bus on the road. I started walking [towards the Delhi Cantt Railway Station]. After walking down to around 3 kms I got an auto rickshaw...[i]n auto, while I was passing through the lanes from Raja Garden, Tilak Nagar and Maya Puri, I could see many houses under fire, many bodies lying on the road in a pool of blood or burning"². Mr. Lal continues with his experience of the same day, "I was waiting at Delhi Cantt railway station when an express train bound for Ahmedabad reached. All of a sudden a bunch of people came and started searching for the Sikhs in the train. Unfortunately one Sikh was seen by the group. They pulled him out of the train but he was able to go back and locked himself inside the toilet of the coach. The group broke open the toilet door and started beating him with rods in their hand...the man started running to escape but few people from the mob put some inflammable liquid on him and put him on fire. The train started moving and the man kept running along the train while he was on fire...until he fell down and became unconscious...in the train I boarded, it was stopped at every station between Delhi Cantt and Gurgaon and a mob was there, searching for the Sikhs passengers."

It is interesting to note that the mob which was responsible for all this violence had less to do with Indira Gandhi's death and more with the activities that they were assigned to do. The mob consisted of people from the lower stratum of society, mainly "sweepers, cobblers, day-labourers or beggars from shanty towns or villagers whose agricultural lands had been [taken]" (Singh 93) and they were aged between 12 and 30. They were more concerned with the loot that they could get after ransacking the homes of innocent Sikhs – killing was just a side fun game (Singh).

"It was the jamna-paar area that was the most affected," remembers Kaur. "My parents used to live there and were scared for their lives. The Sikh families were pulled out of their homes, beaten and then tires put around their neck with their hands behind their backs until they burned to death." In *Amu*, the protagonist Kaju is also a victim from Trilokpuri, one of the worst hit areas. Kaju's real father is killed by mobs while he screams "what have I done?" Kaju runs after her mother who goes to look for policemen and leaves her brother unattended. The mob kills her father and burns down the house, killing her brother along with it.

Mrs. Kapoor recalls the situation in her slightly upper class locality Green Park as stable. "A lot of killings happened in East and West Delhi where there was a lot of concentration of Sikh families. Out here in South Delhi the situation did not get very bad. Even then, the one Sikh family in our locality did not get out for 2-3 days, not even to fetch milk. South Delhi was quite peaceful," she says. The elite of the city did feel protected in a way. In his story *Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi*, Amitav Ghosh narrates his experience as he stayed at his Bengali friend's house in Safdurjung. The neighbouring Sikh family of Mr. Bawa did not move until the mobs were dangerously close and until the friend's family dragged them to their house. In spite of the shouts outside, Mrs. and Mr. Bawa remained calm as they spoke to Mrs. Sen about the most trivial of things nonchalantly.

Lodi Colony in central Delhi also did not experience much carnage. A resident there who does not wish to be named related how only a couple of Sikh shops were burnt down. "It was mainly the poor who were targeted, the rich found their way out. Areas like Jahangirpuri, Trilokpuri, Khichdipur and Mangolpuri were targeted," he says. The Nanavati Commission reports less to no carnage in the south and central Delhi areas.

The help that was extended to the Sikhs also came from certain classes of the society. Mrs. Kapoor explained how her locality helped the Sikh family while they stayed locked up in their house by bringing them groceries and other items of need. Ghosh also says the same. He also talks about a protest in Lajpat Nagar led by Swami Agnivesh, Ravi Chopra and a few leaders from the opposition including Chandra Shekhar, against the massacre. He writes, “The group was painfully small by the standards of a city where crowds of several hundred thousands were routinely mustered for political rallies. Nevertheless, the members rose to their feet and marched.” He describes how the march was “... confronted with...an image of twentieth century urban horror: burned out cars...debris and rubble everywhere...” but they held their own (Ghosh 205)³. In contrast, Mrs. Kaur did not get any such welcome from her neighbour when she went to hide in their house. She says, “We were not called by them. We just climbed over the wall and hid there. They were also scared as mobs kept asking them if they had hidden someone. But it never felt as if they were welcoming us.” In *Amu*, the wife of the Sikh being butchered asks for help from the people around but they do not offer any. Mr. Lal also had a similar experience, “Public in the train as well as on the station just watched with indifference, not doing anything for the Sikh who was burning.”

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“I do not have the power to intervene” (Nanavati 124).
– Then President Giani Zail Singh on being asked for help.

The complicity of the system in the riots is evident in every single narrative. The police, the politicians and even people, no one spared the Sikhs. It is most evident in Nirpreet Singh’s moving account in *I Accuse....*. Her family was able to hide inside after escaping from the mobs. A policeman then came to their house asking her father to come outside and make peace. When the duo went out, despite her mother’s insistence to not go out, the policeman handed him over to the mob which proceeded to beat him and set him on fire. When he was able to douse himself by jumping into a nearby nallah, people tied him up and more joined in. When he doused himself off the second time, a priest shouted that if they don’t kill him, “the sardar” would come back. This time when he was set on fire, he did not rise.

Victims have variously stated the presence of Congress leaders while the mob was rioting and have accused the leaders of inciting the mob. In Jarnail Singh’s book *I Accuse....*, Darshan Kaur recounts how the congress leader HKL Bhagat had provoked the mob: “Don’t leave a single Sardar. They are traitors. Kerosene, weapons, all are there. The police is with you. Crush the sardars”. In *Amu*, the ladies that Kaju and Karan encounter also spell the same tirade against the politicians. Many other witnesses have stated having seen Bhagat with the mobs, as mentioned in the Nanavati Commission report. Khushwant Singh too writes that on the night of 31st October, local Congress leaders and politicians “met to decide how to “teach the Sikhs a lesson they would never forget”” (Singh 91).

The police was as bad as anyone else. Ravinder Kaur remembers, “Our neighbor’s house was looted and especially the gold bangles that they had kept for their daughter’s wedding were looted. Police did absolutely nothing. They were just standing there, looking on as spectators.” In many places, where the victims thought that the police was there to protect them, they were in for a rude shock when they saw the police aiding the mob in their rioting or just not doing anything at all. Not only did the police help the mobs, they also refused to register FIRs in most cases. In the film, when Amu’s mother goes to look for help, the policemen chide her away and the politicians incite more violence in the mob which is ready with its share of arson.

Many texts mention Rahul Bedi’s account of Trilokpuri on the second day of the pogrom. Bedi, a journalist with the *Indian Express*, went to Trilokpuri on the second day and found out by residents that the slaughter had lasted for three hours but local police station told him that “nothing of consequence had happened.” When he asked about a lorry with charred decomposing bodies in it parked in the yard, a police officer said, “The Station House Officer Sahib knows about these deaths but he is in Delhi and will deal with them on his return.” Bedi also mentions how the armed forces were not helpful either, referring to the two army officers who were informed of the massacre but who did nothing to help. Another Air Force officer refused to help while a “second lieutenant on the city’s main ring road said, ‘I have no orders to intercede in any emergency’” (Tully 7).

That politicians were involved is evident due to the lack of official inquiry (inquiries were done by three separate groups) and people’s narratives. The perpetrators remain unpunished till today, two popular names being Jagdish Tytler and Sajjan Kumar.

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“Nothing is ever really lost to us as long as we remember it.”
— L.M. Montgomery, *The Story Girl*.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to delve into more stories. But what these stories do here is reclaim their loss in the event through memory. Although the film *Amu* is about a girl in search of her past, it raises some deeper questions

about the erasure and writing of history. At the personal level, Kaju's childhood and past is erased and rewritten by her adoptive mother. She is given a new name, a new village and a new past. At the level of the event, there is a constant erasure of the memory of the event. Through Kaju/Amu, who is the prime witness in the destruction of her own family; through Karan, whose father is consciously and very openly protecting his son and himself from the memory of the event primarily because he himself was involved in the massacre and through Kaju's mother and family who consciously try to keep her away from 'that area'. When the flashbacks come to her, it is her memory's way of fighting against the writers of her history.

The memories of the people are similarly trying to reclaim a past that is constantly being forgotten and left behind. Yes, these memories hold the potential to stir up more ethnic-clashes in a country whose people are provoked too easily but it is also necessary for people to know how ugly a few words of hate can get. Official records always remain strictly official offering statistics but memory maintains the humanity, or its lack thereof, in such an event.

Notes -

¹ All interviewees are above the age of 50.

² The carnage began late night on October 31st but remained low scale. According to Citizens for Democracy report, the plans to massacre Sikhs on a large scale were made only at night at the behest of various Congress leaders (Singh 1992).

³ Keya Roy in *Amu* was also an upper middle class activist visiting the refugee camps.

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Multiple Meanings of Conflict: The Public, the Private, and Art in Alison MacLeod's *Unexploded*

In terms of the scale at which conflicts impact the human social sphere, one could have nations and communities organised in terms of class, gender, or race and the individual as the two extremes of the spectrum. Indeed, literature in various parts of the world in various ways has not only been a witness to conflict but has also challenged, contradicted, and perhaps even contributed to forces that play a role not only in the generation of conflict but also in determining the impact of conflict. Alison MacLeod's 2013 novel *Unexploded* is an important work because it presents to us a situation which is vital towards understanding the nature of conflicts which mark human societies, as well as appreciating the role that literature, or in general art, plays in relation to conflicts.

At the very outset, I would like to make it clear that *Unexploded* deals with conflict at several levels but this engagement is not the same everywhere in terms of the detail in the narrative. In the wake of the expected attack by the Germans in the small sea-side English town of Brighton during the Second World War, the inhabitants of the town are shown to be preparing their best in order to mitigate whatever impact the attack might have. These acts of communal preparedness include developing warning systems, preparing for an evacuation if needed, delivering warning messages through radio broadcasts and church sermons, cordoning off the beach in order to reduce the impact of a possible sea-attack, creating temporary shelters etc. – these constitute, what I would like to call, the 'public' aspect of the attack. But, as suggested earlier, since the novel treats various levels of the impact of the conflict that it portrays differently, this public aspect of the attack does not hold the attention of its narrative for long, as MacLeod's attention seems to shift to what can be called the 'private' aspect of the impending attack.

What constitutes, then, the private aspect of the conflict in *Unexploded*? This, I would like to suggest, is constituted by a sense of discovery and introspection that comes to mark the characters in the novel in the wake of the expected attack. The attack seems to trigger self-reflexive thought in the minds of these characters, which leads them to see past events in their lives in new but disturbing light (as in the case of the protagonist of the novel, Evelyn) or to discover facets to their existence which they never thought existed (as in the case of Geoffrey, Evelyn's husband, and Philip, Evelyn and Geoffrey's child)¹. I would detail one example of such conflict-induced self-analysis with respect to each of these three characters. It must, however, be noted that the locus of the novel's engagement in terms of the impact that conflicts have on human society is the individual's psyche and not larger social aggregates.

Geoffrey is the highest-ranking bank official at Brighton when he is told by the administration that the town might face an attack from the Germans. In what is clearly a decision influenced by the existence of a marital bond which, to the sad understanding of both the partners, is sagging yet refusing to break, he voluntarily chooses to take up the position of the Superintendent of the Camp that has come up for housing unlawful migrants, political prisoners etc. of Jewish and German/Italian origins. This weakens the bond even further as Evelyn comes to believe that Geoffrey has left her alone with Philip to face the impending attack. Such a circumstance leads her to rethink what Geoffrey has stood for in his life till the point that he chooses to take up the assignment. She realises that he might have always held apparent anti-Semitic sentiments, much like her own parents. She looks for reasons that could explain the physical confrontation that he had at the ball with a Jewish acquaintance but cannot come up with anything. This is a new aspect to the character of Geoffrey for her, one that she hasn't been acquainted with earlier.

Similarly, post the difficult but sad emotional realisation that his marriage with Evelyn is not working out at all, Geoffrey starts visiting the prostitute Leah when he takes the weekly train to London to submit the report of the Camp. This in itself is a telling sign that he now finds himself perfectly capable of loving someone other than Evelyn. In fact, he realises that he has perhaps never really loved Evelyn; he has just needed her to recover emotionally from a disturbed childhood in the face of the major discord that characterised the marriage of his parents. Apart from Evelyn and Geoffrey, *Unexploded* presents to the readers the perspective of their child, Philip. Philip, who has recently realised that Brighton might be attacked, begins to recognise social and emotional resonances which he did not register earlier. Not only does he begin to yearn for an elder brother like the one that his friend Orson has in the face of this emerging difficult circumstance but also asks his parents questions which clearly have no easy answers. In the face of the propaganda broadcasts by Mr. Haw Haw (William Joyce) in the programme 'Germany Calling' through Berlin Radio where Winston Churchill is called a Jew, he wonders if there is something wrong with their family butcher who is actually of Jewish origin.

There is a noteworthy aspect to what has been detailed in the preceding few paragraphs as the private feature of the conflict in the novel. The conflict-induced re-visitation of memory or the discovery of unknown aspects of existence, emotional or social, in *Unexploded* suggests that 'larger' conflicts in terms of their socio-economic and psychic impact, as in this case the Second World War, are inextricably linked to pre-existing social beliefs and prejudices in a particular society (England in this instance) and strives to detail the exact mechanisms through which the latter often, a particular society (England in this instance) and strives to detail the exact mechanisms through which the latter often, but sadly, snow-balls into a large-scale violent confrontation. This is not to deny the obvious politics of economic

gain and selfishness that commonly marks the first attempts at confrontation; instead, it is only to suggest that the novel has been able to achieve this, crucially, by not highlighting the moments when Brighton is attacked by Hitler's forces. *Unexploded* enlists three such attacks (one on the 15th of July 1940 (place in Brighton unspecified), the second on the cinema, and the third on the Common Ground) but at no point does it give the reader a realistic depiction of the cruel impact that German air-raids might have had on the town. Consider, for example, "Early in the morning of the 15th of July, the Dornier 17 slipped in under the radar and circled the town. Most lay clenched in their beds. *Not us. Don't get ideas. On your way now. Bugger off. Imagine it*" (MacLeod 151) (emphasis mine). The narrator not only refuses to let the Beaumonts (the family name that Geoffrey, Evelyn, and Philip carry) face the consequences but even asks the reader to 'imagine' what might have happened. What follows in the novel is a fairly powerful realistic description of destruction in a war-zone but the reader is never told in clear terms that this is what happened at Brighton.

However, it would not be appropriate to think that the contribution of *Unexploded* to our understanding of the impact of conflicts is limited to suggesting, through its various characters, that the same conflict can mean different things to different people, and highlighting connections that complicate an easy binary between the public and the private – at least in terms of the latter leading to the former as I have attempted to underline in this paper. This is because the novel also attempts to deal with the often tenuous relationship that exists between art and conflict. What role does art play in situations ridden with conflict, with Brighton facing attacks during the Second World War? Does it have any recuperative potential? *Unexploded*, in several ways, can be seen as an exploration of the complicated dynamics (that it reveals as) existing between art and conflict. Here, I am focussing on art because it seems to me that all other forces that have conventionally been seen as stabilising and curative in a society seem to have broken down in the novel. Relationships within the family have been rendered meaningless, social bonds with neighbours and friends have become pointless (Mrs. Darlymple, the neighbour of the Beaumonts, does not like them, to say the least), and administrative cooperation now largely manifests itself in the form of strict power-ridden hierarchies (as revealed in the brief story about Geoffrey's bureaucrat friend Tom who is struggling with his associates). As such, it seems that only literature and art possess the ability to give some direction to society as we see it in Brighton.

Unexploded reveals to the reader the way in which art interacts with social forces in a conflict-ridden society by repeatedly – almost in a manner that suggests a pattern (especially in the last two books of the novel) – positing the 'artist' in situations where his/her art helps another individual who is the victim of conflict or is going to be one. This is not to suggest that the artist him/herself is distanced from the conflict; far from it, it is to imply that at that critical moment when assistance is rendered, the victim is in a far more vulnerable position compared to the artist. Several examples can be given but keeping the limitations of space in mind, I would like to focus here on the instance of the assistance that Mr. Pirazzini, the Italian fugitive tailor housed at Geoffrey's Migrant Camp who was persecuted by Mussolini's men, receives from Evelyn and Otto, the German-Jewish painter who is Pirazzini's fellow inmate at the Camp. Old Pirazzini, separated from his wife who is at another Camp whose location is unspecified, dies a painful death in the difficult living conditions. Evelyn, to her husband's surprise and eventual resistance, reads from Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) and *The Years* (1937) to Pirazzini, which brings considerable relief to him. Similarly, after he passes away, Otto not only arranges for him to have a respectable burial but also sketches his nails and other body parts as reminders of the difficult times that people endure in the face of conflicts. These paintings later become the way through which Evelyn realises the hardships that people at the Camp had to endure, which lead her to see beyond the apparent deceptions of Geoffrey that have always bridled her growth as an individual in her own right, apart from her husband. Thus, being directed towards others, art in the novel always has a social purpose to serve, and a goal of communal service to perform. It rarely, if at all, serves the purposes of the individual artist him/herself. The locus of its operation is always the social community and almost never the individual.

It would be a mistake however to conclude that *Unexploded* represents an unequivocal affirmation of the recuperative power of art in the face of conflict. In fact, art seems to be losing the battle which it has waged against conflict in the novel. Leah, the musician, is forced to take up prostitution as a means of sustaining the livelihood of her son and herself at Brighton when she is compelled to migrate into the town. Evelyn reports to Otto (to whom also she has read from *The Years*) that Virginia Woolf has committed suicide by drowning herself, and the latter himself dies in a freak manner by taking a pill given to him deceptively by Orson and Philip after having created a mural depicting the story of King David, Bathsheba, and Uriah from the Second Book of Samuel on the walls of the Church at Brighton.

I would like to conclude by making a brief but what, according to me, is the most important point regarding the relationship between art and conflict that Alison MacLeod's *Unexploded* depicts. If the reader looks closely at the manner in which the novel concludes, the affirmation of Evelyn's apparently unbreakable strength of character and fortitude – "Something painful welled in her chest and her heart laboured beneath her ribs while, unknown, within, at the end of a fine fuse of flesh and blood, *life pulsed*." (MacLeod 337) (emphasis mine) – in the face of Otto's death (she was seen by Geoffrey in a suggestively physical situation with Otto which leads to a physical fight between Geoffrey and Otto)², her husband's suggested death, and the lack of information about Philip rings hollow. Both the circumstances and the forces of memory and history seem stacked against her. The novel, in an almost allegorical re-telling of the story of David, Uriah, and Bathsheba through Geoffrey, Otto, and Evelyn suggests that even as times change, individuals keep playing pre-destined roles in stories that are shown to be relevant over millennia. Consider, for instance, Evelyn's reflections in the Chapel after Otto's death, "Was she seeing on these three walls the story of Bathsheba, Uriah,

and King David or another story, their own, lying in wait within the ancient one, ready to ambush them all: this war, their passion, the Camp's high roof...?" (MacLeod 336). What then is the basis on which MacLeod presents Evelyn at the end of the novel as the strong, resilient woman who survives? This is never specified to the reader.

The contradiction between the resilient individual and the multitude of forces that oppose her/him detailed above, however, would lead a critically discerning reader to wonder about the relevance of art for the purpose of the survival of an individual's subjectivity, because art in the novel is repeatedly shown to have a (limited) social purpose that entails the sacrifice of the individual's subjectivity in the process. In other words, if the individual is the unit marking human existence who is rendered the most vulnerable when exposed to conflict-ridden situations, then how will his/her psyche regain stability if the only recuperative force present in the society, i.e. art, serves a social and communal purpose by operating at a scale necessarily larger than the individual? Thus, to conclude, it should suffice to say that in context of the examination of the relationship between conflict and literature, Alison MacLeod's *Unexploded* is a powerful work because it exposes the reader to a situation where individual subjectivity and the social purpose served by art seem to stand opposed to each other in the face of conflict. Needless to state, it would be very dangerous for us to make an easy and uncritical choice that would value one over the other.

Notes -

¹ Anthony Cummins, in his review of *Unexploded* for *The Telegraph* (20.08.14), has tried to locate this tendency of revisiting the past, particularly in Evelyn and Geoffrey, in terms of the title of the novel. He says, "The novel's title is suggestive of how the war ignites elements that are secretly combustible in the Beaumonts' 12-year marriage."

² Reviewers have noted that Evelyn is the most rounded and detailed character in the novel. Contra her, they note that the detailing of Otto's character is the price that the novel pays for this authorial decision. Cummins, for instance, says, "...but there's also something unpalatable about how it [*Unexploded*] puts an exotic stranger [Otto] on the rack just so the heroine can feel more alive." In a similar vein, in the review of the novel for *The Express* (08.09.13), Charlotte Heathcote comments on the treatment of Otto as, "Having suffered savage treatment at the hand of the Nazis, he [Otto] is a prickly, difficult man; he thaws, growing ever closer to Evelyn, yet is arguably never fleshed out."

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Racial Identity and Assimilation: *Dutchman* and the Conflict of Stratified Identities

The multiple attempts to define coloured peoples' situation and identity in American society have been one of the chief causes of conflict among black writers in America in the twentieth century. While the Harlem Renaissance novelists manifested their interests in defining the Afro-American identity primarily through stratifications of race and gender, it became increasingly problematic for writers to view themselves or their protagonists as either conforming to or outright rejecting these stratifications. This psychological conflict could be best seen in the 1960s, amidst the passing of the Civil Rights' Bill in 1964 and the subsequent Black Power Movement. Since literature is often a marker of both the historical and cultural representations of a period, this paper aims to view the conflict of racial identity in America in the 1960s via Amiri Baraka's play *Dutchman*, also published in 1964, and the author's own conflicting arguments about cultural assimilation vis-à-vis his well-defined political and aesthetic beliefs.

Though the passing of the Civil Rights Bill legally ended the painful politics of racial segregation, social equality was still a far cry, prompting Amiri Baraka (then Everett LeRoi Jones) to move to Harlem in March 1965 after the assassination of Malcolm X earlier that year. This exodus was considered to be the symbolic birth of the Black Arts movement. One finds that there is a substantial shift in Baraka's aesthetic beliefs in the period that elapsed between the writing of his play *Dutchman* and his physical shift to Harlem.

Embedded with mythical implications, the title of the play *Dutchman* alludes to the myth of the 'Flying Dutchman', a ghost ship lost near the Cape of Good Hope that was doomed to sail the oceans forever. Historically, the Dutch sailed the first slave-bearing ship to the American colonies. These two put together suggest that White America has doomed itself through the non-recognition of blacks as humans. It could also suggest that the black male protagonist Clay, and many like him, were doomed anyway, whether they tried to assert their Black identity or chose to assimilate themselves according to their White American upbringing.

Cultural assimilation can be seen as a by-product of racial subjugation, whereby the Black subject feels a sense of inadequacy and dependency in a White world. The divided self-perception of the Black subject, who has lost his native cultural origin while embracing the culture of the Mother Country, produces an inferiority complex in his mind, which will then lead him to try to imitate and appropriate the culture of the colonizer. Such behaviour is more evident in the socially mobile upper-middle class, who use their education as a tool to master the language of the colonizer. With many Black Arts activists rejecting the integrational ideologies of the Civil Rights' Movement, thereby refusing cultural or racial assimilation, *Dutchman* can be seen as a transitional work in terms of Baraka's beliefs about Black identity. For Baraka, passivity is a by-product of assimilation that makes a community stagnant.

The play works thematically in several fields at the same time. This can be attributed to the fact that it was written at a time in which Baraka himself was in search for an orientation in American society. Baraka has accurately depicted the conflict of racial and sexual identity in his protagonist Clay, who grapples with entrenched racism and assimilation by denying his black origins and taking the white world as a model. He is dressed in a suit and tie despite the heat, prompting the white, female antagonist Lula to fit him into multiple stereotypes. She attacks him at two levels. One, she correctly predicts his place of living, his friendship with Warren Enright ("A tall skinny black boy with a phony English accent") and a possible incestuous relationship with his sister, thus not only mocking the attempts at assimilation, but also invoking the stereotype of the Black Savage. She also questions his right to wearing a suit and tie since his grandfather "was a slave and didn't go to Harvard".

Further, she outwardly rejects all claims of the blacks to be American, thus negating Clay's attempts at assimilation, and hence his character, which was a resultant product of this assimilation; she also goes one step further by questioning him about his awareness of his identity. As Clay tries to place himself away from the stratifications of race and gender, suggesting that he imagined himself to be Baudelaire (again a resultant of his cultural assimilation), she directly imposes his black identity on him, jeering at his suppression of his origins ("I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger"). Moreover, she calls him a murderer and an "escaped nigger", thus nullifying all possible attempts (by Clay) to appropriate his origins. She not only problematizes type and stereotype, but also sets forth prescriptions for anti-assimilation and rejections of past excursions, thus stripping Clay of his borrowed identity and culture and rejecting his historical origins. She damns his progress as an erasure by saying that "the people accept you as a ghost of the future", that they hoped he would not go back to his past and try killing everyone. This repeated attack on him reaches its climax when she asks him to dance with her:

Clay, you liver-lipped white man. You would-be Christian. You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man. Get up, Clay. Dance with me Clay (Baraka).

According to Clay, black music and art are escape valves that would not be required if the whites were simply to be exterminated: "A whole people of neurotics, struggling to keep from being sane. And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murders" (Baraka).

Lula's accusation that Clay had escaped to her side, and that his assimilation was killing him makes Clay finally free to expunge his rage. He erupts into a devastating diatribe that avows his contempt for those who surround themselves with illusions to avoid reality, his homicidal hatred of whites, and his need to assimilate so as not to commit mass murder. He attempts to reconcile his origins and his conditioning and sees assimilation as the most non-violent tool in order to do so. This purported defence could be seen in terms of the 'double consciousness' of the blacks, a term coined and explained by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1897 as under:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face (Du Bois).

In this light, Clay's dilemma about his identity becomes more complex, since his tirade at the end indicates that he does not have an accurate understanding of his identity. It also brings to light his inefficiency to mould himself into this dual-identity, a paradox that shall haunt him till his death by Lula.

Lula is portrayed as the femme-fatale and critics have made comparisons between her character and Eve since Lula passes the apple to Clay, thus making her the archetypal, devouring female. She makes the first move with Clay, be it coming to sit with him or speaking to him, or touching him physically. She does seem to posit physical strength — as Clay notices by the strength of her grip — and one wonders if this is a symbol of strength by virtue of her being superior in terms of her race. Other mentions of women are limited to Clay's sister, who (Lula alleges) has been raped by him in their childhood. The act of Clay slapping Lula also asserts Baraka's notions about Black masculinity vis-a-vis white womanhood, and I feel this does more harm than good. It not only conforms to patriarchal stereotypes, but also problematizes the question of identity, since such stratifications promote conformations leading to further identity conflicts when one does not fit in. If Clay tries to fit in, it becomes easy for Lula to condemn him as a savage. If he does not, his assimilation is laughed upon amidst talks of his 'manhood'. Alternatively, the manner in which Lula's character has been sketched out could lead to a reductionist reading of her actions, blaming it on her being female (thus appropriating prevalent misogyny) and conveniently ignoring the racial politics. Another way in which this stratification can be viewed is the assignment of masculinity to the Blacks and of femininity to the Whites, coinciding with an actual black male and a white female.

In 1897, Du Bois had asserted that the Black American could best further his cause by rejecting a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture. Some Renaissance novelists had grappled with the problem of developing life-styles based on Afro-American values rather than succumbing completely in their artistic vision to the middle-class mores of dominant society. But much later, in 1968, Larry Neal echoed sentiments similar to Du Bois' by saying that the Black Arts movement proposed a radical reordering of western cultural aesthetic by formulating a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology. He stressed on the need to develop a 'black aesthetic', which he felt was already in existence: "The motive behind the black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world."

The favouring of self-reliance and 'black consciousness' by Black Arts activists entailed the use of violence, both verbal and actual; as Baraka claimed in his seminal 1965 poem "Black Art", "we want poems that kill". Similarly, his essay "The Revolutionary Theatre" (1965) directly attacks the whites and says that it "must teach them (Whites) their deaths". He says:

The Revolutionary Theatre must Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked. It must Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims. It looks at the sky with the victims' eyes, and moves the victims to look at the strength in their minds and their bodies. Clay, in *Dutchman*, Ray, in *The Toilet*, Walker in *The Slave*, are all victims. In the Western sense they could be heroes. But the Revolutionary Theatre, even if it is Western, must be anti-Western (Baraka).

While the play was performed in front of a dual audience, i.e. both black and white, it is interesting to note that it was condemned as a 'white-hating' play not by the white audience which saw it but by the black audience at Harlem. For the white audience, it was a confrontation with the "Newer negro", who was different from the "de-sexed nigger minstrel, trapped in a role which combined self-mockery with an endearing musicality".

Apart from the obvious conflict between black and white aesthetics, there also exists a more troubling conflict for the blacks, i.e. a constant appropriation and erasure of origins leading to a painful questioning of their identities. Lula's attempt to force Clay to see in himself the negative stereotypes of the black male – as either oversexed stud or cringing Uncle Tom – goads him into a bitter tirade. In this light, Clay's hypothesis that racism can only be solved by refusing to acknowledge it makes his character acquire a certain irony, especially since his attempts at assimilation contradict the sentiments of the movement which suggests a complete annihilation of white aesthetics. He repeatedly retreats into the safety of words from an emphasis on action, defeating himself. He concludes with a warning not to trust assimilated blacks, since they might go on a genocide rampage using their Western conditioning as a justification. As he finally succeeds in destroying Lula's illusions, she coolly stabs him to death, which could be seen as a sample of Western detachment and ruthless precision as opposed to Black sentimentality. It is Clay's hypothesis which is more troubling, since it shows the same passivity that Baraka detests.

One is tempted to ask if the assurance of citizenry leads to the erasure of history; that vexing promise of civil rights. Lula says, "And we'll pretend that people cannot see you. That is, the citizens. And that you are free of your own history. And I am free of my history." These two figures cannot escape from one another or their history, and, as his answers shift from machismo to defensiveness, Clay's insecurities about his race, class and social prowess are laid bare and he becomes the target of Lula's increasingly direct taunts, amplifying the dimensions of racial conflict in the play. To conclude, I would like to state that *Dutchman* serves as an important site of conflict, bringing forth questions of racial assimilations into stratifications created during a turbulent period, highlighting problems arising by a conformation to those stratifications. At the same time, it also serves as an important interlude in the playwright's progress from a poet and playwright to the forefront of the Black Arts Movement.

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Love and/in campuses

Call for contributions; Issue 1, Volume 8.

“Love makes the world go round even if it doesn't last.”
August Strindberg, *Miss Julie*

“...the lover hungers to have her object right where she can love it.”
Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love*

Love is as tangibly political as it is an abstraction. It has been portrayed variously in music, literature and the plastic, cinematic and performative arts, and has almost always been a site for social and communal self-determination. In other words, who to love and how have always been vital for defining a society's moral and ethical codes, and love has been and continues being the domain of contestation wherein politics of conformity and resistance are enacted. Unsurprisingly, thus, love has been sought to be circumscribed and compartmentalised into water tight compartments of sacred profane, heterosexual – and even legal. Although a variety of texts reinforces as well as subverts these definitions so as to define this enigma, love in its various avatars constantly and inevitably coalesces in a heady mix of desires and transgressions, threatening often to rip apart the social order, inviting policing and surveillance and then fighting it out against all odds.

In this issue of *Literophile*, we invite scholars young and old to think critically about love, its politics and its varied sites. Moving away from the more obvious locales of love and desire, such as parks, markets/malls, and hotels, we are particularly interested in consolidating pertinent discourses on the multifaceted role of campuses – university/college, school, professional-office/commercial/industrial – in the framing of love. From *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* and *Student of The Year* to J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Devdan Chaudhuri's *Anatomy of Life*, texts locating and delving on love in educational campuses abound; there is a similar plethora of literary and cinematic texts dealing with love in office, and even industrial, spaces.

The questions we are interested in, then, are: is the possibility of love inscribed only as heteronormative in campuses? Is there any possibility of love in, say, a factory? Is it similar to any such possibility in the office of a multi-national company? Does the hyper-commercialisation of schools and colleges provide nearly inescapable models of love for the (supposedly) all too gullible youth therein? These and related matters form the central concerns of this issue of *Literophile*. We invite **original and annotated papers and/or semi academic articles and commentaries of not more than 4,000 words (including annotations and bibliography) in MS Word format by Sunday, 30th August 2015.** Contributions should be mailed to literophile@gmail.com, and may be oriented on or around the following pointers:

- The right to love: traditions and trajectories.
- Law-love-morality: conjunctions and disjunctions.
- Touching-licking-kissing: how much is enough?
- Depictions of collegiate love.
- Spatialities of love.
- Love, sexuality and the questions of orientation.
- Why so straight?: the curious tale of office romances.
- Disciplining love in schools.
- Violence and love.
- Commercialisation of love.

Please note that the papers must be formatted in accordance with the latest MLA regulations. Contributors must also submit short bio-notes of not more than 300 words with submissions. Contributors will be intimated by the last week of September 2015 regarding acceptance/rejection.

We would love to hear from you. Please mail queries, comments, objections and anything that you might have either for us or the contributors to literophile@gmail.com.

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