



Past Continuous / A Life Apart or a (dis)Integration: Alienation, Transgression, and the Grotesque Body in Neel Mukherjee's Novel

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1. INTRODUCTION

*Past Continuous / A Life Apart*¹ was published in 2008. Unlike many other migration stories about the Indian community abroad, this novel deals with the protagonist's MA year in Oxford as well as his experience of illegal migration. The book tells the story of Ritwik, who, after his parents' deaths, moves from Calcutta to Oxford to read for an MA in English Literature. When his student visa expires, he remains in the United Kingdom illegally and starts a descent into the underworld of illegal migrants, exploited workers, and prostitutes. His story has a counterpoint in that of Miss Gilby, which occupies almost half of the novel and is a rewriting of Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* [*The Home and the World*, 1916]. As the English teacher of Bimala, the wife of an Indian landowner, Miss Gilby attempts to integrate into Indian society, but, in the wake of the Independence movement, she is the first victim of nationalist violence.

¹The novel was first published in India as *Past Continuous* by Picador in 2008. For the US and UK editions, the title was changed to *A Life Apart*. This paper refers to the 2011 UK edition.



Through the mirroring characters of Ritwik and Miss Gilby, Neel Mukherjee's first novel explores the complexities of the migratory experience and tackles the issue of the migrant's role and relation with society. *Past Continuous* examines the migrant's position within the community both in her/his country of origin and arrival. Through this, it offers an insight into the variety of motives behind the choice of migrating as well as the obstacles encountered in the new country. Both at home and abroad, the migrant is an alien, i.e. someone who is in contradiction and conflict with the society s/he lives in (see Khair 2001: 4, 25-29). As such, after leaving her/his home, s/he is not fully able to integrate in the arrival country, nor does the new community completely accept her/him.

Relying on these premises, this essay will analyse *Past Continuous* as a distinctive example of migrant literature. It will start by locating the novel into the genre of diaspora and migration literature. Then, it will examine it from three thematic viewpoints: alienation, the status of British women in India, and transgression.

2. PAST CONTINUOUS / A LIFE APART AS MIGRANT LITERATURE

Central to great part of postcolonial literary writings are migrants, either exiles, refugees, expatriates or émigrés. These terms define extremely different situations, as Edward Said explains in "Reflections on Exile" (2000). While expatriates and émigrés voluntarily decide to live abroad, exiles and refugees are forced to move by external circumstances, such as banishment – in the past – or contemporary economic and political crises, war, and famine (Said 2000: 181). Various labels as 'migrant literature', 'literature of exile' (with reference to expatriated intellectuals in particular) or 'diaspora literature' (as related to diaspora studies in postcolonial theory), this sub-genre of postcolonial fiction encompasses a number of distinct (dis)locations and circumstances.

Rosemary Marangoly George starts exactly from the notion of 'dislocation' to discuss and define this sub-genre, arguing that "the contemporary literary writing in which the politics and experience of location (or rather of 'dislocation') are the central narratives should be called the 'Immigrant Genre'" (George 1996: 171). Although George's 'immigrant genre' partly overlaps with the more renowned notion of 'diaspora literature', it is worth to point out some insightful considerations the critic makes. George marks the difference between literature of exile, postcolonial literature in general, and the 'immigrant genre' by underlining the latter's connections to colonial and decolonial discourse, its disregard for nationalism and the tendency to view the present in terms of "its distance from the past and future" (George 1996: 171). This is particularly significant in relation to *Past Continuous*, as the novel stages a detachment from individual pasts and ideas of nationhood, while at the same time drawing a parallel between colonial and postcolonial history. Furthermore, George identifies the defining feature of this sub-genre in "a curiously detached reading of the experience of 'homelessness'" (George 1996: 171). As we shall see, this entails a feeling



of non-belonging both to the country of origin and to that of arrival, which subsequently leads to social exclusion and alienation.

Similar to dislocation, but with an entirely different theoretical background, the term 'diaspora' can name both "a *geographical* phenomenon – the traversal of a physical terrain by an individual or a group – as well as a *theoretical* concept: a way of thinking, or of representing the world" (Procter 2007: 151). Originally used to name the exile of Jews from Palestine, in postcolonial studies it refers in general to the movement of people brought about by colonialism. Thus, it comprises the colonizers' migration towards the colonies, the resettlement of colonised people in other parts of the world – as in the case of indentured labourers –, slave trade, and, finally, migration from the colonies to the (ex) motherland. In theoretical terms, diaspora as an imaginative and representational stance has often been a point of departure for the discussion of questions of nation, race, and gender. In fact, migration challenges the space of the nation and opens up new ways of thinking about identity and belonging (Bhabha 2000: 300).

Dealing with the stories of two migrants, *Past Continuous* questions notions of personal and collective identity and belonging, while challenging the relation between the present and the past. It can therefore be situated in the vast realm of migration literature. However, the novel approaches the themes of migration and identity from an entirely new angle. Neel Mukherjee himself stated in an interview:

The story of alienation and exile has been told so often, and abused, particularly in that dreaded subgenre, 'the immigrant / diaspora novel' (ugh ugh ugh), that I felt that a reinvention or a renewal was necessary if it was to be pressed into the service of truth-telling. One way to do this was to strip the story of migration of clichés and sentimentality and all the bad habits it has fallen into and to try and think it anew. (Mukherjee in Mizra 2012)

In fact, while most diaspora novels deal either with the émigré for educational purposes or the subaltern, economic migrant, *Past Continuous* tells the story of a voluntary slippage from one condition to the other. The difference between the two kinds of migration is significant from the point of view of the literary genre. In this respect, diaspora literature and theory has been accused of privileging the experience of the cosmopolitan intellectual rather than that of the subaltern worker (Parry 2004: 70). While this critique may obliterate the transformative value of much diaspora literature, it is nonetheless true that less critical engagement has been devoted to the subaltern migratory experience (McLeod 2008: 4). Most importantly, however, the divide between skilled and unskilled migrants is central to contemporary European migration policy, as Mezzadra and Neilson point out:

Often it seems as if skilled and unskilled migrants occupy different universes of migration, living in parallel worlds where the experiences and political stakes of their mobilities are radically incongruous. In many public discussions there is even a reflexive and fallacious tendency to correlate skilled migrants with documented



mobility and assume that 'illegal' migrants must be unskilled. (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 137)

Thus, the relevance of *Past Continuous* resides exactly in the fact that it dares to explore and challenge the border between different migratory situations, and the status of 'differential exclusion'² which characterises migrants' lives.

Furthermore, the novel goes beyond the dichotomy between allegedly 'right' and 'wrong' reasons to move or stay abroad. While the rhetoric around migration usually stigmatizes economic migrants, Ritwik, the protagonist of *Past Continuous*, puts the accent on the right that everyone should have to a better and happier life:

'Look, Gavin, one runs away from a country because of war, famine, torture, repressive regimes, all sort of thing. Those are very serious things. But isn't someone justified in turning one's back on unhappiness, just turning away from the end of the road? I'd like the opportunity to start again, in a new place, with new people. Is that so unthinkable?' (Mukherjee 2011: 191)

After the completion of his MA in Oxford, Ritwik is supposed to go back to Calcutta, a suffocating family life, and the haunting memories of his childhood. Instead of what he perceives as "the end of the road", he decides to overstay his students visa and work without a permit. In becoming an illegal migrant, Ritwik enters the realm of the undocumented, those without official record; he loses his political status, his citizenship rights. Ritwik becomes 'bare life' (Agamben 1995, 2005):

There are no events, only records. To give all this the slip is to drop out of official, recorded life, of validated life. It is to move from life to existence. On the 21st of December, Ritwik Ghosh will do exactly that: he will silently let his leave to remain in England expire and become a virtual prisoner in this new land. (Mukherjee 2011: 256)

The silent passage to 'bare life' will further estrange and alienate Ritwik from British society. We shall see that *Past Continuous* does not believe in the possibility of integration and of realising one's ambitions. Indeed, as Sehgal points out, Neel Mukherjee's work is a much more sceptical novel if compared to earlier examples of migrant literature, which "tended to be optimistic by nature", by staging stories of "upward mobility tinged with nostalgia for the motherland and animated by the character's struggle to balance individual desires and the demands of the family and the community" (2016). In contrast, *Past Continuous* presents an internal drama which involves the struggle for an impossible adaptation to a hostile country and to one's own self (Sehgal 2016). For these reasons, in the next section of this paper, we will

² Castles defines 'differential exclusion' as "a situation in which immigrants are incorporated into certain areas of society (above all the labour market) but denied access to others (such as welfare systems, citizenship and political participation)" (Castles 1995 in Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 162)



discuss the theme of alienation in the novel, and how it goes beyond Ritwik's story to touch upon all those excluded by society.

3. ALIENATION: OUTSIDERS IN BRITAIN

Alienation and migration are often connected. Marx originally defined the term as dehumanization and estrangement derived from labour and capitalist social relations. In a broader sense, it is used to indicate feelings of separation from the rest of society, exclusion from political life and a sense of absence of meaning in one's own existence, deriving from the impossibility to fulfil or actualize one's own essence or nature (Wood 1998). The uprooting from one's own culture and social relations may result at first in a sense of loss, dislocation, alienation and isolation, which usually leads to processes of acculturation (Bhugra 2004). However, environmental and personal factors can compromise this process and bring about a permanent feeling of isolation and estrangement (Bhugra 2004).

As such, alienation plays a significant role in diaspora fiction. According to Rosemary Marangoly George, the sense of homelessness and homesickness can evolve in two ways, as a "yearning for the authentic home" or as "the recognition of the inauthenticity or the created aura of all homes" (George 1996: 175). In the case of the immigrant novel, the latter usually prevails (George 1996: 175), in that the perception of estrangement prevents the migrant from feeling at home either in the new country or in the one s/he left. Aijaz Ahmad in *In Theory* identifies this sense of permanent displacement with "a propensity to inflate the choice of immigration with the rhetoric of exile" characteristic of "Third World Literature" (Ahmad 1994: 243). Drawing from Ahmad, Tabish Khair goes a step further and recognizes the 'rhetoric of exile' as a mask for alienation. According to Khair, the Indian middle-class migrant feels estranged both abroad and at home, often even before leaving for the first time (Khair 2001: 67-69). The conflict with the society which surrounds the migrant is such that alienation assumes both spatial and temporal dimensions, in that the subject feels alienated from the past and the future, his country of origin and his new one (Khair 2001: 67-69).

Similarly, in *Past Continuous*, estrangement and alienation are articulated on multiple levels. In spatial terms, we have a double displacement, first from Calcutta to Oxford, then from Oxford to London. In both Oxford and London, Ritwik is always afraid of getting lost and his disorientation increases in the occasions someone drives him around. His 'home' is first the college room, which he describes as both a heaven and a cell, then Anne Cameron's decadent and crumbling house in London, a precarious shelter from the harshness of migrant life. Instead, refusal and nostalgia mark Ritwik's relationship with his city of origin. Calcutta appears in numerous flashbacks as a city characterized by either dust or monsoon floods, and, above all, decadence and disease. Neel Mukherjee's sometimes extremely graphic prose conveys all the disgust that the protagonist feels for his hometown, which culminates in his final decision not to go back:



How could he explain that he was also trying to escape the wet sticky monsoons; the blood-drying heat of summer, which made him a drugged, ill, slow creature for six months of the year; the insects that came out in giant colonies and multiplied during the rains; the sheer filth and mud of Calcutta streets, which welled in over the edge of his frayed sandals and oozed between his toes; the thirteen hours of power cuts every day; the chronic water shortage; the smell of paraffin and kerosene oil everywhere; the soot on the glass of the hurricane lamps; the random days without meals, all fanning and exacerbating the tension in the joint family, year after slowfestering year? (Mukherjee 2011: 190)

The contrasting feeling of nostalgia towards Calcutta brings Ritwik back to his troubled relationship with his childhood and family. One day, the British weather reminds him of the monsoon in Calcutta:

On rainy days like this, nostalgia wraps around him like an insidious fog; it is everywhere, but while inside it, he can hardly tell how enveloped he is in it. Nostalgia, and something else. He won't name it, he won't even think about it because if he lets go for even a few seconds, the grey sour rain outside will bend him to its own form. This rain, in a different land, slightly over a year after his parents' death, can read him. He won't think about them lest the rain reads him again, as it has done for the past two months, and reduces him to its sad, transparent cipher. (Mukherjee 2011: 40)

Together with nostalgia, the memory of monsoon rain triggers the grief for his parents' deaths and the repressed trauma for the violence endured during childhood. Both trauma and nostalgia are ways of renegotiating the past, building one's own identity and dealing with loss. On the one hand, through nostalgia, Ritwik mourns the impossibility to return to Calcutta and the loss of his home country. It is a feeling common to many migrants; however, here Ritwik does not actually want to come back to India. The death of his parents unburdens him of any sense of responsibility towards his family. Even more, grief and the subsequent move to Britain come as a liberation from the violence of his childhood, which is frequently recalled in the first part of the novel. Traumatic memories return as ghostly apparitions of Ritwik's mother and in several flashbacks, where the protagonist remembers the recurrent beatings and the psychological abuse inflicted by his mother (see for example Mukherjee 2011: 46-48). Thus, trauma contributes to alienating and estranging Ritwik from his past, to the point that he prefers to live illegally in London and abandon his younger brother back in India – though he perceives this as a betrayal (Mukherjee 2011: 191) – rather than going back to Calcutta.

In the novel, alienation occurs also in the sense of a difficulty to mingle with other people and a general feeling of estrangement from fellow students and, later, the rest of British society. Ritwik's initial social anxiety derives from his eagerness to integrate and make new acquaintances. However, his efforts to meet new people often induce him "a similar feeling of distance, as if he were watching himself trying to



learn the rules of a new game” (Mukherjee 2011: 42). Acculturation does not prove to be easy for Ritwik, especially when his presence arises odd comments on India and its exoticism.

Social estrangement progressively draws Ritwik to the alternative space of Oxford public toilets, where he picks up strangers for sex. It is a borderland, both public – because it is outside home – and private – because it is nonetheless the territory of a specific community, although extraneous to the norm of heterocentric domesticity (Moran 2001: 112). Referring to the space of Oxford public toilets, Banerji notes that “in his dislocation Ritwik creates a marginal world for himself where he feels he belongs” (Banerji 2010: 88). His new identity is in fierce opposition with what his mother desired for him:

At other times he just sits away the hours in his cubicle thinking, ‘What would you think if you saw me now? *This*, this stench of urine and disinfectant and cock, this is what I am, not what you wanted me to be.’ And he punishes her more by staying on another extra hour when he knows there won’t be anyone else visiting the public toilets that night. (Mukherjee 2011: 183)

In the second part of the novel, social inclusion becomes even more difficult for Ritwik. Ritwik has lost citizenship and political rights and moves from one fruit-picking job to the other, with always different people. Despite the claim of his Pakistani neighbour that “in this country we need to stick to each other and have our own community” (Mukherjee 2011: 248), he does not become part of a community of migrants. In fact, most fruit-pickers group along ethnic lines and, in spite of his efforts, Ritwik does not mingle with Polish and Kurdish people. In the heterogeneous underworld of illegal immigration, he feels progressively “subdued and aimless” (Banerji 2010: 89).

In London, Ritwik lives with Anne Cameron, an old English lady who hosts illegal migrants as caretakers, because she cannot afford any other form of domestic help. The two are completely different characters, nonetheless Ritwik discovers several affinities with her. In fact, Anne has links with India, in that she lived there for ten years with her husband and son during colonial times. Her husband, Christopher, was an Anglo-Indian, born in India and employed into the Civil Service. After her husband’s death, she went back to England with her son, Richard, who, however, later killed himself, probably because of his homosexuality. Now, Anne lives alone, with no family nor friends, and can barely provide for herself. Both estranged by society, Ritwik and Anne develop a relationship of mutual friendship, affection and understanding. Moreover, Anne Cameron functions as a sort of reflective centre of the novel. On the one hand, her condition of social oblivion and alienation parallels that of the protagonist. On the other, her story provides a connection with that of Miss Gilby as rewritten by Ritwik, which covers almost half of the volume. Both Anne and Miss Gilby have links with colonial India; both experience social estrangement. In relation to this, in the next section, we will analyse the re-enactment of *Ghare Baire* by Rabindranath Tagore in *Past Continuous* and its relations with Ritwik’s storyline.



4. COUNTERPOINT: BRITISH WOMEN IN INDIA DURING THE EMPIRE

A great part of *Past Continuous* comprises the rewriting of Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* [*The Home and the World*, 1916] from the point of view of Miss Gilby, the English lady Nikhil hires to educate his wife Bimala. In the fictional world of Neel Mukherjee's novel, it is Ritwik who starts rewriting *Ghare Baire* while he is in Oxford. He decides to concentrate on Miss Gilby because "she was so marginal, her presence so brief, vanishing almost before her story began" (Mukherjee 2011: 55-56). In *Past Continuous's* structural balance, the story of Miss Gilby acts as a counterpoint to Ritwik's.

Curious toward classical music, Ritwik reads about counterpoint on the *Collins Concise Encyclopaedia*:

Counterpoint. *The term comes from the idea of note-against-note, or point-against-point, the Latin for which is **punctus contra punctum**. It consists of melodic lines that are heard against one another, and are woven together so that their individual notes harmonize. In this sense Counterpoint is the same as **Polyphony**.* (Mukherjee 2011: 117, emphasis in the text)

This definition allows us to explain the choice of a contrapuntal structure for the novel. Miss Gilby's story can be read against Ritwik's, of which it is a reflection and a completion, much like Anne Cameron's. The two accounts resonate and harmonize with each other, adding depth to the various narrative themes. Furthermore, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said defined contrapuntal reading as a method to approach colonial texts, taking into account both the perspective of the colonised and of the coloniser. Conceived in this way, Neel Mukherjee's rewriting of *Ghare Baire* stems from a sort of contrapuntal reading of the novel, which aims at emphasising the role and perspectives of British women in colonial India. This is not to diminish the importance of Tagore's novel per se, but to shed light on another kind of migration – that of the British towards the colonies – and on how it mirrors contemporary diaspora from the former colonies to the ex-Motherland.

Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* touches upon the interconnected issues of violence, anti-imperialism and nationalism. Set around 1907, the novel deals with one of the earliest waves of Indian nationalism against the British, which followed the first partition of Bengal by the Viceroy Curzon in 1905. The so called 'Swadeshi movement' involved primarily the boycott of British products in favour of Indian manufactured goods. It also entailed episodes of mass agitation and passive resistance, expanding the economic boycott to a total non-collaboration with the British. Although it failed as a mass movement, Swadeshi obtained the reunification of Bengal in 1911, and helped to pave the way towards Indian independence (Sarkar 1973: 493-494).

As the Swadeshi movement spreads in Bengal, Bimala, the female protagonist, gets caught up between her husband's humanistic patriotism and the virulent nationalism of his friend Sandip, which inevitably leads to violence and a tragic conclusion. At the beginning of Tagore's novel, Nikhil, Bimala's husband, hires Miss



Gilby to educate his wife and to serve as her home companion. Nikhil has unusually modern views on the role of women in society, therefore he wants his wife to disregard *pardah*³ and to receive an education. Although she has quite a marginal role in the novel, Miss Gilby is the first victim of the wave of intolerance and violence generated by Sandip's nationalism. In fact, as nationalist violence erupts, she is forced to leave the estate and return to Calcutta. Neel Mukherjee's rewriting takes on from this small event in Tagore's novel and tries to reconstruct the reality of an independent English woman in India. The portrait he provides is that of an unconventional character which tries to act as a bridge between cultures and wants to improve the condition of her 'Indian sisters'.

The role and presence of women in India were extremely significant for the survival and continuity of the British Raj. British women were "essential not only to reproduce legitimate imperial rulers, but also to reproduce the social, moral and domestic values legitimating imperial rule" (Blunt 1997: 255). An efficient administration of the Raj relied on good home-making and housekeeping by British women. In fact, household management in India was part of the same imperial project which entailed military campaigns and administrative duties for the male component of society (George 1996: 51-52). In this respect, a variety of handbooks were written by British women in India with the experience, or even professional expertise, to instruct newcomers on household keeping, domestic economy, health and household hygiene. British women in India were responsible for maintaining "domestic as well as imperial standards along the lines of class and nationality" and the failure to maintain these standards was regarded as a sign of personal ignorance (Blunt 1997: 282).

In *Past Continuous*, Miss Gilby comes to India to manage his brother James's household after the death of his wife. Upon arrival, she feels "a sense of freedom, of dissidence even" and realizes that her new country was a place "where she was going to have to learn all over again" (Mukherjee 2011: 29), disregarding British manners, notions and ideas. Her curiosity for India and its inhabitants is certainly unexpected in the British "community of exiles" (Mukherjee 2011: 27), regulated by strict social rules in terms of class, gender and race divisions. Miss Gilby is supposed to fall into the rigid hierarchy of British society in India, but she challenges it right from the beginning. For example, at parties, she does not talk only with women at her same social level, but goes around and tries to socialize with everyone, included Indians – a habit which is frowned upon:

Parties were thrown to show who stood where, immovable, the possibility of mobility a dangerous mirage [...]. It didn't come as a surprise that she was punished for breaking the rules, especially the central rule of the Raj – you didn't treat the natives as equals [...]. The natives inhabited a different world from their masters and governors and the space in between was, should be, unbridgeable. (Mukherjee 2011: 30)

³ *Purdah* is "the practice in certain Muslim and Hindu societies of screening women from men or strangers, especially by means of a curtain" (OED 2016)



The separation between British ladies and the natives was one of the milestones of the Raj. For British women in India, domestic and imperial roles intertwined especially in the relationship with Indian servants, as it was important to establish and remark racial rather than class difference. The emphasis on the former was fundamental to the imperial project. Without it, Indian servants could be compared to British servants back in Britain, and consequently British society to Indian society, which was obviously contrary to theories of racial superiority. In this light, learning Hindustani or Urdu was for a British woman only a means for better administering power. On the contrary, Miss Gilby decides to learn Bengali out of curiosity and becomes friend with her language teacher.

Similarly, Miss Gilby tries to come into contact with Indian women, despite the limitations inflicted by *purdah*. However, she soon realizes the extent of the barriers represented by language and cultural differences, which lead to numerous misunderstandings during her first encounter with the Maharani of Mysore and her family. Therefore, Miss Gilby sets out on a battle to bring “the light of knowledge to Indian women” (Mukherjee 2011: 166). When she moves to Calcutta, she finds an ally in Mrs Violet Cameron – who, we can conjecture, is Anne Cameron’s mother-in-law in Ritwik’s fiction –, equally interested in educating Indian women and equally estranged by Anglo-Indian society for her disregard of social norms. While Miss Gilby tutors the wives of wealthy Indians, Mrs Cameron sets up a school for Indian women in her own backyard.

It is worth pointing out that the improvement of the status of ‘our eastern sisters’ was usually part of the ‘white woman’s burden’ during colonial times. To the majority of the colonisers, “the white woman’s status in society was the norm, the yardstick by which ‘native’ lack was measured” (George 1996: 58). This implied that the contemporary white woman was already emancipated and had achieved gender equality. Miss Gilby and Mrs Cameron’s battle to bring “the light of knowledge to Indian women” may seem to fall into the fulfilment of the ‘white woman’s burden’. However, their attitude is much more varied and complex. In fact, their educational effort goes hand in hand with a sincere interest in local culture and politics. Miss Gilby studies local language and culture, and writes about women’s rights; Mrs Cameron actively participates in Bengali political and intellectual life – much like historical characters such as Annie Besant. Furthermore, their sense of belonging is not entirely devoted to the British community. With the mounting of the swadeshi movement, Miss Gilby finds her loyalties divided between her two countries:

Miss Gilby feels caught up in the great arch of political movements and it is not without its slight tinge of fear – what if these men were plotting a Revolution to overthrow the Raj? Where does she stand then? [...]. She feels oddly divided, melancholy, as if her loyalties were neatly riven and have been called into question, as if two equal forces were pulling her in contrary directions. The sense of implied betrayal she feels is already enormous. (Mukherjee 2011: 211-213)



However, this feeling of double belonging hides a bitter reality. Miss Gilby becomes an outcast both among the Anglo-Indians and the Indians. While the Anglo-Indians do not accept her for her disregard of social norms – with the notable exception of independent women like her –, the Indians identify her with the colonisers. In fact, the swadeshi movement gives rise to anti-English sentiments among the Indian population. Bimala stops attending Miss Gilby's lessons and Nikhil warns her not to leave the house unaccompanied, fearing for her security. However, she does not follow his advice and falls victim of a brutal beating. After the attack, despite his sympathies for the English lady, Nikhil deems too dangerous for Miss Gilby to continue living in his estate and sends her back to Calcutta. The social estrangement that affects Miss Gilby mirrors that of Ritwik and Anne Cameron. As it is the case with Ritwik, Miss Gilby's exclusion stems from her dislocation and the difficult acculturation process. Beside alienation, Miss Gilby and Ritwik have in common a path of transgression. In the last part of this essay, we will consider how this theme is developed in the novel.

5. BORDERS THROUGH THE BODY: TRANSGRESSION AND (DIS)INTEGRATION

The term transgression derives from the Latin 'transgredi' and means going beyond the limit of what is socially and legally acceptable. In this sense, there are multiple transgressions in *Past Continuous*. For instance, Ritwik's illegal status and his queer sexuality and Miss Gilby's disregard for social norms along with her mingling with Indians. In more general terms, if transgression involves the crossing of a limit – the border –, the whole experience of migration potentially becomes a transgression, that is, a violation of national, linguistic, and cultural divisions. As habitual transgressors, both Ritwik and Miss Gilby are punished and disintegrated, with fatal consequences for Ritwik.

Throughout *Past Continuous*, the body is presented as the site which, on the one side, represents multiple instances of border crossing, and, on the other, bears the signs of transgression and its consequences. In *Contested Bodies*, Holliday and Hassard note that "the body is both material and representation, and these two domains through which we come to 'know' the body intertwine in complex ways" (Holliday and Hassard 2001: 3). Indeed, bodies are "the physical site where the relations of class, gender, race, sexuality and age come together and are embodied and practiced" (Skeggs 1997 in Holliday and Hassard 2001: 3). As such, Ritwik's body is a sign-bearer of his location, both social and geopolitical. In the 'cottaging business'⁴ he realises that "his is a type of minority appeal, catering to the 'special interest' group rather than the mainstream, because of his nationality, looks, skin colour" (Mukherjee 2011: 127). Conversely, Ritwik wonders "whether he really fancies Gavin or whether it's just a generalized hunger for the white men" (Mukherjee 2011: 77). This geopolitical placement of the body has various implications:

⁴ To "cottaging" means "to use or frequent public toilets for homosexual sex" (OED 2017)



The body is both mobile and channelled, both fluid and fixed, into places. It is not only the 'geopolitics of the body' but also the politics of connections and disconnections, of rights over the body, of the body as a site of struggle [...]. This cartography of places through her body reveals that ways in which she is positioned through her body, but also how her body becomes capable of imagining these connections and territories differently. (Nast and Pile 1998: 3)

The body is the primary location of a human being, at the same time subject and object of social issues and political decisions. In relation to migration, the idea of a "cartography of places through the body" implies that borders pass through the body as they are crossed by it.

Ritwik's passage from legal to illegal migration puts a strain on his body right from the beginning. Fruit picking is a job only migrants do, due to the hard and debilitating work conditions. In addition to that, initially Ritwik is not even used to manual work:

You had to either squat or bend, moving like a crab, awkward and hobbling; the first applied unbearable tension to the thighs, the second broke your back [...]. Before midday Ritwik felt as if he would never walk straight again, his back hunched, the stoop taking its own time to relax and let him ease, very slowly and painfully, up into erect position again [...]. When the dehydration headache kicked in, first a slow contracting behind the eyes and then the drilling at the temples and at the back of the head, Ritwik decided that finding water couldn't be put off any longer. (Mukherjee 2011: 285)

Ritwik's body is bent in a painful and unusual position, deprived of food and water, for ten to twelve hours a day. Time goes by slowly and boredom is only broken by intermittent conversations with fellow workers. After a time in the job, and having saved enough money for a month or two, Ritwik quits fruit picking. When the money starts to run out, he turns to the dark alleyways behind King's Cross and begins to stroll along the so called 'Meat Mile', in search for clients. Ritwik is driven by the 'easy' money and the sense of fear that he finds "somewhat erotic, a conditioned reflex from his cottaging nights" (Mukherjee 2011: 325). However, even in that place of transgression, he is "a freak [...], the break from the norm expected in the 'Meat Mile'" (Mukherjee 2011: 326). Labelled as a "fucking queer" (Mukherjee 2011: 326), he makes all sorts of strange and dangerous encounters. One night, he meets Greg, a "builder-type man", who forces him to strip naked and wear woman's underwear and stiletto shoes:

The shoes were too big as well. At least, Ritwik just had to put them on, not hobble around in them and possibly break his ankle. As he wrinkled and manoeuvred in the cramped space, he was suddenly seized by an intense curiosity to see himself in a mirror, wearing oversized woman's knickers and bra and wriggling around to stretch out his long, thin legs on to the front seat



through the narrow gap between the driver and the passenger seats. (Mukherjee 2011: 329)

This grotesque image brings to the extremes Ritwik's queer identity.

Indeed, throughout *Past Continuous*, the queer body emerges as the central element of Neel Mukherjee's grotesque realism (Bakhtin 1984). Consider, for example, the environment of Oxford public toilets, a public space which becomes the private space of the cottaging community. In this borderland between public and private, the body escapes the surveillance of society and subverts the norm, so that a person has the opportunity of "acting one's body, of wearing one's flesh as a cultural sign" (Butler 1992 in Moran 2001: 112). The people in the Oxford public toilets break from heteronormativity and create their own set of rules, bodily conventions and taxonomies:

1. Standing at the pissoir, his cock out, massaged to erection. He hides it and pretends he has just finished peeing, shaking the last dribble off it if some kosher pisser enters the toilet. Sometimes he just buttons up and enters his cubicle. If it isn't a genuine pisser, and he likes the look of the man, he stands there, making it obvious what he's doing. Chances of a hit on this one: 50-50, 50 for liking the man, 50 the other way around [...].

5. Several people at the urinals. Sometimes this has what Ritwik calls the 'honeypot effect' – one or two cruising men at the urinals suddenly start attracting practically all the cottagers in the St. Giles toilets until there is a row of men, cocks out, checking each other out, all heads tilted left or right, angled downwards, sometimes craning back to catch the eye of someone on the other side of the mirrors and sinks. It is a predictable set of movements, but of all the methods, this gives the most direct access to the goods. (Mukherjee 2011: 125)

The public toilets are a world of "urine, disinfectant and cock" (Mukherjee 2011: 183). Indeed, bodily fluids and sexual organs are central to the cottaging business, and to grotesque realism. For this reason, the description of the men in St. Giles toilets emphasises single body parts, particularly genitals, and thus breaks individual bodies in a collage of erected penises and oddly inclined heads. The body parts which protrude and communicate towards the outside play a leading role in this particular kind of realism, as the grotesque body is defined by its tendency to transgress its own limits and to go beyond its individuality (Bakhtin 1984: 317). Centred around sexual organs and bodily functions, the encounters at St. Giles toilets stage a carnivalesque ritual which subverts social conventions, and creates a queer space where the homosexual body acts freely.

Moreover, contrary to the contained and regimented body, the grotesque body can get out of control, it can leak. For instance, both Ritwik and Anne wet themselves in one occasion:

He lets the liquid heat of his piss comfort him in its trickle down the inside of his leg and, when his saturated jeans cannot take it any more, watches it leak through



pathetically in weak, stuttering drops on to the carpet. He is pissing, shaking and sobbing beside his desk, his room now completely in the dark. (Mukherjee 2011: 48)

After a hallucinatory vision of his mother, followed by the return of the traumatic memories of his childhood, Ritwik loses control of his body, which starts to leak, as if to finally let go of the past. What would normally be a shameful moment, becomes an act of liberation, and, from this point, Ritwik stops suffering from hallucinations, although he is still tormented by past memories. To Anne as well, the leaking body is strangely reassuring:

But, no, she is doing it now on her sofa, the hot, comforting trickle, the gathering wetness under and around her like a leaking amniotic sac; she hopes the men will not notice [...], but, oh dear, it has somehow managed to be rebellious and trickle over the edge and fall drop by drop at first and then in a halting dribble on to the carpet. (Mukherjee 2011: 198)

On the one hand, the bodily fluid envelops the old lady in a womb-like embrace. On the other hand, however, Anne feels upset by the clear sign of her aging and growing dependence on other people. The images of childhood, child-birth, and aging – all moments in which individuals do not fully control their bodies – melt together.

Likewise, sexual encounters become mere exchanges of bodily fluids:

It is as if Ritwik starts fading for Zafar during the sex and disappears completely afterwards. It is as un intimate as physical contact gets and is always preceded and followed by a shower, in an attempt, Ritwik supposes, to sluice off ritually not only semen, sweat, the touch of another body – there is no saliva for Zafar never kisses – but also the bigger intangibles that he perceives to come with this paid sex. (Mukherjee 2011: 350-351)

Zafar is Ritwik's rich and mysterious Arab client who wants to become his only lover. Although Ritwik would certainly enjoy the economic security provided by Zafar, he is not comfortable with Zafar's strong and possessive will and their uneven sexual relationship, satisfactory only on Zafar's side. To the Arab man, Ritwik is only a body with which to satisfy his own needs, and intimacy is reduced to as little as possible. Bodily fluids are swiftly washed away in a purifying ritual, which mirrors and opposes the freedom with which sexuality is enjoyed in St. Giles toilets. Unhappy, Ritwik continues to return to the 'Meat Mile'.

However, once again, transgression proves to be a dangerous business. One night Ritwik gets bitten and menaced with an acid bottle by two pimps who do not like his intrusion in their territory. When Zafar finds out, he asks Ritwik to stop going to the 'Meat Mile'. Still the place attracts Ritwik irresistibly:



His insides are fizzing fireworks of fear; it runs, thick and sluggish, in his feet, his calf muscles, his knocking chest, turning them heavy and light at the same time. Where does this end and hunger begin? Initially he stays on streets from where running out onto York Way or Caledonian Road would be a short sprint, but the slowly diffusing smoke of the drug inside him obliges with its addictive hits only when he strays into the darker, more remote areas of the maze. The thought of those pimps with the acid bulb explodes in a delicious crackle-and-flesh of fear in him. Tonight he will go with anyone and not ask for money. Tonight it is faceless pleasure he is after. (Mukherjee 2011: 393)

It is Ritwik's body that drives him first to the public toilets in Oxford, then to the alleyways behind King's Cross. He is an addict to the fear and excitement of sexual encounters with strangers and cannot avoid the dangerous places where these take place. Consequently, as it is the case with Miss Gilby, his continuous strive for transgression is punished. During another night walk on the alleyways, he runs into a group of white men, who attack him. Calling him "Paki scum", "Paki bastard" and "fucking wog", they chase, beat and in the end stab him. Through the meeting with a racist mob, Ritwik faces the final exclusion from British society: death, that is, disintegration.

Ritwik's disintegration stems from his alienation, progressive estrangement from British society and transgression from the norm. As a queer migrant, he is everything white heteronormativity tries to repress and punish. Moreover, his undocumented status reduces him to 'bare life', i.e., Agamben maintains, a life that can be freely killed. Few episodes throughout the novel trace the mounting discrimination towards refugees and asylum seekers – often a metonymy for all migrants in public discourse – with the term 'refugee' becoming "hot with stigma, almost unspeakable" (Mukherjee 2011: 290) and the *Daily Mail* fanning the flames, titling: "Britain tops asylum seeker intake in Europe" (Mukherjee 2011: 393). Therefore, on the one side, alienation, poverty, hard and unstable working conditions exclude migrants from the rest of society; on the other side, racial discrimination draws on this exclusion to further mark a difference. As alien, and even deprived of legal status in some cases, the life of the migrant becomes less and less valuable, until someone decides it can be taken away.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Past Continuous depicts a colonial and postcolonial society which does not accept and include diversity. Ritwik and Miss Gilby face punishment both for their attempts to bridge differences and for embodying the other. In this way, the grotesque body becomes the material representation of the alien and the excluded. However, while, according to Bakhtin, grotesque realism often conveys an optimistic message of rebirth, here the novel does not seem to envisage any positive outcome for the experience of migration. Indeed, migrants can encounter only estrangement, alienation and, ultimately, disintegration.



Furthermore, the materiality of the grotesque body counteracts the abstract idea of nation. The people who murder Ritwik do so in the name of a nationhood which excludes and stigmatises the migrant. Indeed, in present-day Europe, the resurgence of nationalism is intimately connected with a tightening of the legislation on asylum and migration, and the stigmatisation of migrants and asylum seekers, as “unwanted others, if not criminals” (Moslund et al. 2015: 8). In other words, contemporary European nationalism is constructed through the exclusion of migrants, as Bromley suggests:

Myths of national belonging are part of a defensive territorial self-fashioning and develop in relation to concepts of not belonging – the foreigner, the other, the stranger. These others are configured through a set of fixed stereotypes which form the basis of wished-for political, social and cultural exclusions. The asylum seeker is often used to consolidate the ideology of shared identity and national sovereignty. (2015: 57)

Therefore, the social and political exclusion of Ritwik, as well as of any other migrant, is the product of the current discourse on identity, and of ideologies of nation. As such, the displaced migrant looks for forms of alternative belonging. On the one hand, Ritwik feels a sense of inclusion only in places where his body drives him to, like Oxford’s public toilets. On the other hand, his status of ‘bare life’ reduces him to nothing but his body, the only place to which he can claim some sort of belonging. While today the stranger is expected “to downplay any political index of physical difference” (Khair 2015: 64), Ritwik shows his foreignness not only through his physical appearances (in the ‘cottaging business’ he is ‘a minority appeal’, and his murders identify him straight-away as Pakistani/Indian), but also through queerness and transgression. These, together with his adherence to a corporeal dimension, reflect a belonging to the place-body, rather than to a nation. Indeed, in *Past Continuous*, the rootedness in the bodily and the corporeal acts as “a radical *substance* below the *metaphysics* of nations” (Moslund 2015: 238, emphasis in the text). It is a form of belonging that comes before any social and cultural construction of identity, a sensuous reality that pertains to every human being, despite his/her (dis)location, but especially to displaced migrants, as they do not have any other location. Bertrand Westphal labels this bodily placement of the migratory experience a heterotopia “from which the individuality shines through in the best cases – or simply survives, in some less favourable cases” (Westphal 2011: 67). In conclusion, with respect to earlier and more optimistic examples of migration literature (see Sehgal above), *Past Continuous* shows the changed and challenged status of the migrant in Europe, and reflects on contemporary forms of belonging, which go beyond family and nation.

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