Spatiality and the Literature of Globalization

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What does literature teach us about globalization or imagining the global? Does it make sense to speak of a “literature of globalization” or “fictions of globalization” when scholars continue in their deep disagreements about the shape and reach of global phenomena? And, if so, what would these novels, short stories, or poetry look like and what are their main concerns? The cultural analytics of space and its effects on how we read fiction, especially fiction written by minorities, is important to these questions. Global flows and the inequalities they generate affect how fiction is published, marketed, read, and taught in our universities today; therefore, they embody important portraits of globalization’s effects on social life. A novel like Shani Mootoo’s *When Cereus Blooms at Night* illuminates how colonial notions of space have been carried over into the world under globalization, and how those notions organize our experiences in racial, gendered, and sexual terms. Because globalization has often replaced former colonial masters with native elites, and the national borders set in place after decolonization have not disrupted colonial spatial logics, some aspects of colonialism continue to shape minority experience today.¹ Notions of space under globalization and how it affects the ways in which our bodies are legible in racial, gendered, or sexual terms, remain anchored to colonial notions of space.

The imaginary island of Lantanacamara in the novel is based on Trinidad and Tobago, formerly a British colony. Written as a letter by Tyler, the omniscient narrator, the novel’s plot is structured through the characters’ experiences as Tyler understands and interprets them. Tyler, the transgender nurse who cares for Mala, addresses the narrative to Asha, Mala’s sister who manages to escape from Lantanacamara, and also to the readers who chance upon the letter and who might know Asha “wherever she might be.”² Thus, it addresses and implicates a global readership as its intended audience. The novel begins

1 See Masao Miyoshi’s article on how the history of colonialism sets the stage for globalization. Decolonisation at the end of WWII signals a change in the form of government, but the relations of colonialism are still present in the relationship between transnational corporations, native elites, and the poor (p. 728). The question of whether or not globalization is exactly like colonialism in all aspects is beyond the scope of this essay as it merely focuses on spatiality.

2 Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 4.

with the story of how Mala's father, Chandin Ramchandin, was adopted into the white Reverend Thoroughly's family as a child, and later is abandoned by his wife, Sarah, who absconds with Lavinia Thoroughly. The children Mala and Asha were prevented from escaping, and the rest of the novel narrates the repercussions of that interrupted flight from Chandin's home. Mala eventually becomes insane after being regularly raped by her father and subsequently abandoned by Boyie, her lover, with whom she is finally reunited at the end of the novel.

Space influences the responses to the novel in a number of different but related ways: first, the novel is taught and categorized based on geopolitics, whether consciously or otherwise;³ and second, critics note that questions of space are important thematics when they comment on racial, economic, and gendered differences in the novel; and finally, less obviously but no less importantly, the novel's narrative strategies reveal how social discourses surrounding racialised subjects depend on how space is divided and organised. The geopolitical concerns of globalization are mirrored in the extant criticism of the novel where the debates around *Cereus Blooms at Night* is symptomatic of our continued reliance on geopolitical divisions in literary studies.⁴ At various institutions, the novel is read and taught alternatively as South Asian, Caribbean, Asian-Canadian, Asian-American, diasporic, or a postcolonial novel. The umbrage that these debates sometimes provoke reveals how seriously literary critics take our national or regional assignments. They reveal not only our need and desire for clear categories, but also that these categories are often based on spatial relations. Both the desire for and the lack of clarity is symptomatic of globalization's effects on the experience of space.

As a form of social and cultural organisation, how we navigate space embodies the structural problems of economic and social inequality. Feminist geographer Gillian Rose argues that space is the medium of social experience and it determines both our social relations and subjectivity.⁵ How we understand the

3 Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), begins with the "...distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts...." (12), and today, to continue to remain unaware of how geopolitics affects literary criticism and debates is to remain willfully unaware of how power works in academia and in publishing.

4 See for example debates in Eleanor Ty's and Christl Verduyn's edited collection, *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography* (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier P, 2008), especially the essay by Clarissa Lai.

5 Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 19.

social role of motherhood, for example, is informed by codes of behavior that depend on the places in which those behaviors take place. Today, most of us live our lives in the space of the city, and increasing global urbanization has revealed multiple, new social and political challenges because the spaces of the urban and the rural are spaces that are highly inequitable.⁶ In other words, space is important to all our social experiences.⁷

Critics have paid considerable attention to the novel's settings and its characters because they experience multiple marginalizations and displacements. For example, Mariam Pirbhai reads Mala's yard as a metaphor for new forms of community-making;⁸ Dunja Mohr similarly notes that the division of house and garden represent patriarchal and matriarchal lines of power;⁹ and for Isabel Hoving, plant metaphors represent traumatic histories that otherwise cannot be represented.¹⁰ Sarah Casteel argues that the Caribbean garden serves as a witness and testament of the violence of colonialism and of European scientific knowledge, but that the garden also holds the key to freedom and independence.¹¹ I follow these critics in their emphasis on space as illuminating the racial and gender hierarchies at play in the novel by foregrounding how patriarchy organises our social experience in gendered terms. However, while most of this extant criticism lauds the novel as a form of utopian resistance, my reading also complicates those characterisations because minorities' experience of globalization continues to be marked by concepts of space set in place during colonialism.

6 *Cereus Blooms at Night* is not set in a city, but as David Harvey argues in his essay, "Right to the City," globalization means that the rural and the urban are interdependent.

7 George Lipsitz demonstrates in his chapter "The Crime *The Wire* Couldn't Name," *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011) that as successful as the television series is, it ignores the effects of housing policies have had on black communities in the US. The humanities are also important to understanding space's effects on racialised subjects because, as Said argues following Foucault, discursive power has effects as real as those exerted through political institutions.

8 Mariam Pirbhai. "An Ethnos of Difference, a Praxis of Inclusion: the Ethics of Global Citizenship in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*," in *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography*, eds. Ty, Eleanor, and Christl Verduyn (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier P, 2008), 258.

9 Dunja Mohr, ed. *Embracing the Other: Addressing Xenophobia in the New Literatures in English* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 287.

10 Isabel Hoving, "Gardening in the Jungles of Post-Coloniality: Representing Multiculturalism and Hybridity," in *Bridges Across Chasms: Towards a Transcultural Future in Caribbean Literature*, ed. Bénédicte Ledent (Belgium: Liège Language and Literature, 2004), 214.

11 Sarah Casteel, *Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 135.

Spatial Relations of Colonialism and Patriarchy

The major themes in *Cereus Blooms at Night* are of spatiality, but space also plays an important part of the novel's revelations and it is this stylistic element that most obviously mirrors colonial notions of space. Cause and effect in the novel's plot progression depends as much upon space as it does the chronological sequence of the characters' actions. The different periods in the novel are organised and presented as representations of space while Chandin's life is divided between the plantation barracks, the Thoroughlys' home, the seminary, and finally, his own home. His daughter's life passes completely in her own compound; and the space of that home becomes a way of marking the passage of time in the village. Subsequently, occultation and revelation within narrative development occur through the use of colonial spatial tropes, especially in the later sections when the town discovers Mala's garden and her father's corpse. The novel's central tensions are rooted in the regulation and transgression of spaces and the relations around those spaces, and the text offers a way of challenging colonial notions of space that have been carried over into the present age but it does so without offering utopian possibilities.

Overall, the plot's major progressions occur when the different characters invade and (mis)use the spaces normally associated with patriarchal, racial, and sexual order: Sarah and Lavinia manage to evade Chandin's surveillance and their relationship develops in Sarah's kitchen while he is away at work; as Sarah and Lavinia plan their elopement, Sarah keeps the house in order to avoid suspicion; and later, Mala's and Ambrose's courtship is later consummated in the same kitchen. By drawing our attention to how unspoken rules govern our use of space through the transgressions of those rules, the spatial dimension of the novel teaches us to see how male domination is sustained because men and women have separate, unequal spheres of influence. Gender inequality is discernible and also sustained because of the spatial practices that condition those behaviors. For Marangoly George whose work takes up political definition of home and belonging, the space of "home" is itself a fictive idea that nonetheless has immense discursive power. What may seem like an organic entity within social life is really a product of textuality, that is, a constant discursive construction and reconstruction of the links between people and their spaces.¹² The concern over space in this novel is so primary

12 Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction* (California: University of California Press, 1999), 11.

because it establishes the forms of social relations that reproduce regimes of power and control.

The strict markedness of certain spaces as “Chandin’s” or “Sarah’s”—presented as a map of the colonial home—begins when Chandin moves in with the Thoroughlys as a member of the white missionary family:

Chandin’s favorite time of day was after the evening meal when the family gathered in the living room for an hour of relaxation. At other times he was unsure of his place in this new household...Chandin found that a straight-back upholstered chair had come to be marked as his. Although it was only a physical place, the chair became an antidote to the chaos of his uprootedness.¹³

The chaos that is the colonial home, for Chandin, is a chaos resulting from his multiple experiences of the space of colonization. He is twice displaced, first as part of a migrant family, and then as a transposition into the missionary family; here, he first learns that space makes sense only when it is accompanied by rules about how it is to be lived in, and by whom. Later, in his own house, Chandin establishes separate territories within its grounds: the house itself is marked as feminine, domestic space that he rejects along with his marriage while he claims the porch, the gateway to the house, from which he can police the comings and goings of those who enter his house. By doing so, Chandin reclaims a patriarchal power that allows him to draw boundaries as a form of agency not allowed to him while he lived with the Thoroughlys. Gayatri Gopinath in particular, argues that Mala’s home can be productively read as destabilizing the terms of colonial domesticity when read as a counter-space to Chandin’s,¹⁴ but Gopinath’s reading of space is utopian only as a form of reaction. Mala reclaims as her own space the garden that is first designated as the children’s space only after losing her sanity. Her reclamation, like Chandin’s, is a mimicry of the colonizers’ need to submit space to colonization, and this mimicry, I will argue, manifests itself in crucial ways in and through Tyler’s narration which is the focus of the last section of the essay. Tyler is not a colonized subject, but his reproduction of colonial tactics in his narration marks him as a subject of globalization where colonialism’s politics is made invisible even while it is still at play.

13 Mootoo, 31.

14 Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005), 183.

Spatial Relations and the Body

The development of the novel depends on the subversion of the rules governing how space can be thought of and used that are a legacy of colonial paternalism.¹⁵ This belief that the control of space is therefore a control over the bodies that inhabit those spaces recasts women as objects to be owned that further invokes tropes of colonialism, and they remain relevant to globalization. Colonialism and globalization are not to be conflated, but insofar as spatial logics are concerned, globalization continues to rely on colonial logics of space. The gendered and racialised subject continues to be circumscribed by these spatial logics even if it appears as a mirror image, and I will argue that Tyler embodies globalization's effects on minorities even as he perpetuates them.

Mala's trauma cannot be explained solely either in colonial terms, or as a story of globalization. Because there are historical continuities between the two phenomena, any reading of this novel then has to recognize that its form also reflects those historical continuities. Until we recognize how these logics still hold a great deal of explicatory power, globalization's utopian promises will continue to seem like a farce to minorities. In this novel, even though Tyler is a sympathetic narrator who is himself marginalized, he nonetheless also inhabits a privileged position.

The spatial encoding of codes of behavior has historically affected the colonial subject disproportionately because of the fear of the racial and feminine Other. As Amy Kaplan argues, the notions of "domestic" and "foreign" go hand in hand; one without the other makes little sense:

The concept of foreign policy depends on the idea of the nation as a domestic space imbued with a sense of at-homeness, in contrast to an external world perceived as alien and threatening. Reciprocally, a sense of the foreign is necessary to erect the boundaries that enclose the nation as home. Domesticity, furthermore, refers not to a static condition, but to a process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, and the alien.¹⁶

15 Such intersections explain why extant criticism on the novel argue that the novel offers an exemplary treatment of solidarity between the two main characters, but instead I argue that such solidarity is nonetheless mitigated because the narrator continues to navigate space according to colonial logic.

16 Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002), 25.

In order to secure the colonial center, that is to secure empire's "at-homeness," colonialism had to create terrifying foreign Others. However, in this novel, the control of colonial space and the control of bodies of color are turned on its head. The space and bodies of whiteness and the space and bodies of minorities have to be "managed," but they are managed as if in a mirror image.

The process of "domestication" becomes truly terrifying in the case of the minority in this novel. Mala's father dominates and controls Mala's body when he rapes her, and it appears as a grotesque mimicry of colonial conquest. "Domestication" in the novel does not mean enforcing domestic boundaries, but rather, tearing them down so that the colonizer is granted greater access to that body. Mala has to be "disciplined" and "tamed" because her body, so much like her mother's, is threatening, and this discipline comes in the form of refusing Mala any control over her own body. While the white mother in the imperial imaginary is a figure through which the woman's "moral influence" secures the boundaries of empire, the figure of the racialised Other is marked by the very absence of boundaries that reminds us of the spatial logic of how corporations work under globalization.

Gillian Rose notes that in feminist histories of science, images of "conquest," "violation," and "penetration" were central to seventeenth-century science, and that they helped legitimate the exploitation of nature, read woman:

The femininity of Nature invoked both the passive and nurturing Mother Nature of organic theories of the self and cosmos, as well as the tempestuous and uncontrollable wild Nature of storms, pestilence and wilderness; both Woman's fecundity and her evil lust placed her closer to Nature than men, and both characterized Nature itself.¹⁷

Women's bodies always already exist as a representation of space; as representation, women's bodies need to be physically controlled but that control is further completed and supplemented by the interpretation of the body's symbolic meaning; women's bodies are a synecdoche for space. Like the colonies, weaker countries today need to open up their borders to centers of capital flow. If the purity of the white colonial mother is a synecdoche for the wholeness of the colonial metropolitan center—they are whole because they are bounded and closed—then Mala is a synecdoche of how former colonies need to be opened up to globalisation's flows. Colonial figurations of bodies and spaces continue to be relevant because minorities' experiences reflect how globalization reproduces similar relationships of power.

17 Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography*, 69.

Thus, the focus on how space is claimed, owned, or colonized gives Mala her legibility and status as a subaltern, and it is also crucial to the novel's plot development. In the sections of the novel where major revelations take place, the plot evolves because of how the social significance of space transforms the social relations that are represented. For example, in the middle sections of the novel, Mala's yard is a metonymy for how her body is an object of fear, and how the village's relation to that fear of her body changes as the community changes. Mala's yard and body have no essential meaning except to serve as a reflection of the social changes within the community

The villager's decision to contain Mala is parallel to the changing nature, use of, and response to the social significance and the control of space:

Everyone in the village seemed to have finally forgotten about Mala. The generation of children who harassed her by calling names and pelting her with mango seeds had grown up. Their children preferred to chase each other within the confines of their own yards, playing games of cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians.¹⁸

The first generation of neighborhood children cope with fear and discomfort by invading Mala's yard and stealing the fruit from her trees. The second, later generation of children, however, do not invade Mala's yard but instead enact in their own yards games that mimic real plays of power and control of states. Under globalization, in Tyler's narrative perspective, space and the body of the Other performs similar functions, but have different qualities where the actual act of policing has become more subtle. The relationship between space under colonization and that which has been formally decolonized is one of continuity insofar as space requires careful policing.

In this second generation, the present-time of Tyler's narration, Mala is not just unknowable in the sense that she is unable to make her voice heard, she has become physically absent in their games of power and control. As a specter, Mala continues to play a role in the disciplinary mechanism of surveillance:

They occasionally noted the ever-widening, ever-lengthening rows of bleached white snail shells planted along the inside of her fence. But they expressed no curiosity about this or about her rare, unpredictable appearances out of the impenetrable sea of brambles and stinging nettles that barred a view of her house. When they had to pass by, the children walked

18 Mootoo, 113.

on the other side of the street, glancing through her fence—not to see her but to make sure she did not see them. According to their parents, she possessed the ability to leap her fence, track an offending child into its hiding place and tear out its mind.¹⁹

The children's playacting no longer mimic the direct invasions of the colonial period, instead, in their studious avoidance of Mala's yard, space contains and constrains Mala's and the children's behaviors because those fears have become internalized and are thus invisible. The children have been disciplined to see their own yards as "safe" spaces where they ritualize the practice of policing one another, but it is the racial and feminine Other that provides the unconscious fear of and desire to police space. Similarly, under globalization, even though foreignness is no longer controlled by direct geopolitical power, it nonetheless remains a figure of fear and suspicion that affects global social relations.

As the novel progresses, the villagers' fear of Mala's yard results in her eventual confinement in the nursing home because Mala's yard embodies her so-called madness and she is consigned to insanity in part because of how she uses and inhabits space in ways that are strange and illegible. But Mala's insanity is itself a product of and response to the social significance and the control of space; and her conduct is a response to the personal trauma of having had her body literally treated as colonized land. Her most poignant response to the psychic colonialism of sexual abuse and abandonment is represented in her relationship with her imaginary friend, Pohpoh, the little girl who stands in for Mala's younger self, and it mirrors colonialism's spatial violence.

The novel's narrative structure interweaves Otoh's actual physical incursions into Mala's yard with Pohpoh's nightly, possibly imaginary, invasions of other families' homes. Pohpoh, also Mala's childhood nick-name, is the little girl that Mala creates at about the same time she "loses" her mind. It is at this point in the novel when Mala "sees" Pohpoh hiding, and manages to "protect" and "free" Pohpoh from the police; the distinctions between Mala and Pohpoh also begin to blur:

Fear was breaking her, was unprying her memory. She was reminded of what she usually ignored or commanded herself to forget: her legs being ripped apart, something entering her from down there, entering and then scooping her insides out. Her body remembered. Mala remembered. She heard the voices of the police. She reconfigured what they said to match

19 Mootoo, 113.

her story of how she saved Pohpoh that day.... She squeezed her eyes tightly and ignored the people trampling, destroying her yard. She put all her efforts into protecting Pohpoh.²⁰

In Mala's mind, the territorial invasions are inseparable from the rape of her body; Mala is "mad" because all space is the "same" to her, and this sameness is further enabled by the breakdown of the temporal frame. Her singular, very particular experience of spatial and temporal order consequently, and her refusal to explain or defend that experience, responds to even if it does not comment on the violence she has encountered.

In these sections, Mala resorts to the language of property and proprietorship when she becomes the imaginary Pohpoh who traverses silently through the neighbors' homes, but only insofar as to recognize her own marginality. Pohpoh, Mala's alter ego, still lives in her father's house but has the power to invade her neighbor's houses by night. These homes belong to what Pohpoh imagines to be a "happy," complete family, and in this, her dreams are a grotesque reworking of Chandin's own desires for a "happy family": "She imagined bedrooms with a happy family, a fairy-tale family in which the father was a benevolent king. There would be a fairy queen for a mother and enough little cherub siblings to fill a very large shoe or pumpkin carriage, their fat, *pink faces* smiling even as they slept."²¹ The fairy tales which form Pohpoh's imagination are not Afro- or Indo-Trinidadian, but European. Their influence cannot be traced to Mala's own childhood, and it is a form of cultural imperialism that is disingenuous because it has been normalized. The reclamation Pohpoh's journeys transgresses not only the boundaries her father places on her, but also that of the white Other to whom the fairy tales belong:

...the layout of houses were predictable, depending on the social status of the dwellers. It thrilled her to have guessed correctly which room followed which. Her eyes brightened with triumph as she stood at the entrance to the living room.... There would be no hint of a stranger's presence, no trace of entry.... She felt triumphant. Avenged.²²

Pohpoh's triumph or vengeance is not aimed at this particular family or at any one particular family but rather is directed at the artifice of the class-specific "happy family" whose image we first see through the boy Chandin's eyes when

20 Mootoo, 175.

21 Mootoo, 157 (emphasis added).

22 Mootoo, 158–159.

he first moves into the Thoroughly's home. But why does Pohpoh feel triumphant and vindicated by these trespasses? On whom has Pohpoh taken revenge, and what is the form of that reprisal? Pohpoh's victory can be attributed to not only her invasion of the families, but also to how that invasion remains undetected.

Spatial Discourse and the Limits of Narration

The stylistic features of narrative affect our understanding of space because as Michel de Certeau argues, stories in and of themselves are spatial practices; they contain codes that order movements in space. "Story" offer ways of organizing or analyzing space that allows it to change and affect spatiality rather than being constrained by it because of how it conditions the way we think about and experience the world around us.²³ Stories establish the limits of spatiality by telling us where the narrative begins and ends and thus orders our experiences for us: "[Story] creates a field that authorizes dangerous and contingent social actions.... A narrative activity, even if it is multiform and no longer unitary, thus continues to develop where frontiers and relations with space abroad are concerned."²⁴ While feminist and Marxist critics such as Gillian Rose, David Harvey and George Lipsitz demonstrate that our experiences of our cities impacts and shapes our communities and our relations to the world, de Certeau turns our attention to how narratives set up the experience of space in the first place. The practice of reading or listening to a story precedes the social relations that the navigation of space enables.

The unreliable narrator of the novel sets up narrative limits that are crucial to the reading of the novel as less than utopian, and such a reading, therefore, has implications for how we understand the politics of globalization. Other critics have often focused on the novel's narrator and note that as the novel's main narrator, Tyler is at once a liminal and a central character. For example, Rosamand King describes Tyler as liminal because the text precludes his own stories as a transgendered subject, and it is representative of the social exclusion that transgendered communities experience in the Caribbean.²⁵ The position from which one speaks establishes a strong link between space and

23 Michel de Certeau, transl. Steven Randall, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1984), 121.

24 Mootoo, 125.

25 Rosamond King, "Re/Presenting Self and Other: Trans Deliverance in Caribbean Texts," in *Callaloo*, 31.2 (2008), 585.

truth; the position of marginality gives us a clear view of power's disastrous effects.

Critics further observe that Tyler's marginality as a narrator and a character enables us to the limitations of our political imagination. Vera Kutzinski takes the position that as a first-person narrator, Tyler refers to himself only as "I," and thus performs the possibility of obviating the limitations of language in identity politics.²⁶ On a textual level, therefore, Tyler forces us to reject as inadequate the kinds of critical acts that purport to clarify even as they obscure:

Tyler's narrative, and Mootoo's novel, pleads with its readers to take care to notice Mala's 'ordinariness' underneath the labels that less careful readers affix to her: madwoman, murderer, incest victim, freak.... We may not be able to do without abstractions and categories. But we can refuse to use identity labels as epistemological shortcuts that, at one glance, tell us everything we need to know—about individuals, ethnic groups, nations, and yes, critical methodologies. Because identity labels simulate knowledge, they obstruct imaginative access to the complexities of human lives and of lived communities.²⁷

Kutzinski draws parallels between Tyler and Mala as they both repudiate a subject formation constituted on the basis of the gaze of the other. Kutzinski's reading here is reminiscent of poststructuralist arguments that feminist and other minority subjects are discursively produced by the very political structures that profess to give them their freedoms.²⁸ In her reading of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Kutzinski uncovers the limitations of representational politics through the parallels she draws between Tyler and Mala. The categories of "madwoman" and "transgender" are reduced to ontological equivalence, even if it is in the form of a negation, and as a consequence, Kutzinski reveals how empty those categories are when they are divorced from representational politics per se. Tyler's position read as either marginal or central therefore reveals the need for different kinds of knowledge and political interventions.

However, most extant criticism of the novel does not note Tyler's unreliability as a stylistic device in the novel, but the effects of Tyler's language and

26 Vera Kutzinski, "Violence and Sexual Others in Caribbean Literary History," Lieven D'hulst, Jean-Marc Moura, Liesbeth De Bleeker, and Nadia Lie, eds., *Caribbean Interface* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 43.

27 Kutzinski, 144.

28 Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is one of the more classic, well-known examples of post-structuralist arguments in this vein.

rhetoric is perhaps worth noting.²⁹ In her essay “An Ethnos of Difference,” Mariam Pirbhai’s reading of Tyler notes his unreliability but nonetheless contends that as a nurse, Tyler not only ameliorates Mala’s material conditions where she has been institutionalized but also sets into motion an emotional healing process through their shared identification as outcasts and outsiders in Lantanacamara.³⁰ Pirbhai recognizes that Tyler is not above “narrative slippage,” and that indeed, such slippages are constitutive of Tyler’s performance as an amateur biographer or interpreter.³¹ Pirbhai reads the breaches, gaps, and interruptions in Tyler’s narration as enabling both characters to engage in friendship. But more importantly, these breaches also identify the socio-political processes that fragment the characters’ sense of self in the first place.

While he is a sympathetic, perceptive and kind narrator, Tyler shifts from the positions of first-person and an omniscient narrator throughout the novel, and he informs our understanding of Mala and her history. His own concession that he is liable to “lapses” as a narrator in the opening of the novel teaches us to approach the text with caution. Even sympathetic narrations cannot be fully trustworthy because like Tyler, our concepts of space and land continue to retain colonial influences; the stories he tells are refolded into a colonial imaginary but their position of privilege and power are now hidden.

Consequently, the correlation between Tyler’s and Mala’s shared queerness or shared marginalization cannot be read as unequivocally utopian because Tyler uses the vocabulary, and consequently, the ratiocination of colonization. For example, the description of Mala’s garden and her life in it after she becomes insane is partly related to us in scientific language that presumably belongs to Tyler who speaks as an omniscient narrator: “At first Ave, Hexapoda, Gastropoda and Reptilia burrowed instinctively into nooks and crevices. They realized eventually that they had no cause to hide.”³² Tyler’s “lapses,” as he calls them can take the form of autobiographical interruptions, but Tyler’s melodic insertions of himself and his life story are not distracting, violent, or even unpleasant. However, Tyler’s “narrative slippages” present Mala’s life in a

29 Rosamond King is right to point out how Tyler’s recognition that he is “only” a device sets limits on the value of his own story, but she does not account for how his unreliability plays out in the novel.

30 Mariam Pirbhai, “An Ethnos of Difference, a Praxis of Inclusion: the Ethics of Global Citizenship in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn, eds., *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography* (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier, P, 2008), 255.

31 Pirbhai, 249.

32 Mootoo, 128.

language that arguably does not belong to Mala. These narratives consequently retain trace of the voice of an Other whose choice of language and tropes is not apolitical. Tyler's interruption into Mala's narrative is insidious because it is not so much an interruption as it is a naturalization of his own voice, and it is precisely our inability to distinguish between Mala's and Tyler's perspectives that allow some critics to valorize their shared queerness.

That inability to distinguish between the two also allows for a conflation that is both too easy and too uneasy. It is too easy because without Tyler, Mala's story would be completely illegible, and it is also uneasy because the text forces us to question that very access when it foregrounds Tyler's voice as a voice that still depends on colonial notions of space. Pohpoh's bittersweet and hauntingly repetitious victory directs our attention to how the novel complicates our own responses to Mala's story because this colonial language recasts Mala's story as Tyler's own. The denotation of ownership in Mala's garden reflects Tyler's values rather than Mala's own: "Mala *permitted* them to roam boldly and multiply at leisure throughout her *property*."³³ Reading the novel is an uneasy experience not because the madwoman narrates her own story in a contemporary update of the "Yellow Wallpaper," but because the text again refuses to give us access to the subaltern. Thus the text reflects to us our desire—so much like Tyler's—to possess a text that reveals the inner motivations and desires of its protagonists.

As an omniscient narrator, Tyler exposes our desire for knowledge, especially our desire to know the motivation behind the putative "sick mind." Why does Tyler claim to know "the truth, the whole truth, every significant *and* insignificant bit of it,"³⁴ and on what basis do we trust Tyler's declaration? The scientific categories in these descriptions are reminiscent of colonial efforts to categorize and classify different kinds of knowledge, and therefore require us to reexamine Tyler's hubris when he claims to know "the whole truth." Tyler's and Mala's shared marginalization should be acknowledged and certainly their friendship is central to the novel. Nonetheless, Tyler's and Mala's shared marginality produces tensions between the politics we would like to see affirmed in the text—in this case, utopian possibilities for people who are oppressed by racial, gender or sexual inequalities—and how the text stops short of portraying that victory as unmitigated or conclusive.

Walter Bissey, the judge who presides over Mala's case in court had tormented Mala, Asha, and Ambrose when they were children. The cruel pranks played on Mala were mimics of the territorial logics that later governs Mala's

33 Mootoo, 128 (emphasis added).

34 Mootoo, 7.

adult life: the playground was divided into territories, and the water-pipe at its center is the position of power, from which Mala, Asha, and Ambrose were ostracized. When Mala confronts Walter and his friends in this section of the novel, Walter draws a line on the ground between them but then changes the rules:

Walter crossed over his side of the line. 'This is my side, you can't cross it!' Pohpoh said. He stared at her in disbelief. He and his friends burst out cackling, hissing and jeering, as though it was the funniest joke they had ever heard. They laughed so hard they doubled over, hitting their thighs and holding their stomachs. 'Is you who draw the line? Or me? I draw the line. I go where I want. Who have stick in they hand? You or me?'³⁵

That there are rules belies the fact that those rules are subject to change on the whim of those who "have stick," a lesson Mala learns early in her life. Despite any extant laws on private property or rape, Mala has little recourse to gaining the protection under those laws. Even Asha's letters which could have changed the course of Mala's life were not delivered, "because the righteous postman, deeming the Ramchamdin house to be a place of sin and moral corruption, refused to go up there."³⁶ Despite suspicion and even knowledge of the rapes, nothing is done to protect Mala. Instead, territorial logics of good and evil are used to ostracize and further inflict harm on those who are already victims.

The victories, revisions, and reclamations of space and spatial practices are merely punctuations within the novel that have to be read in light of its more proper, if wistful and uncertain ending. At the end of the novel, Mala is at least saved from incarceration by a childhood schoolmate who is now a judge, and who manages to track down Asha's letters. But this novel also ends where it begins. The organisation of spatial tropes in the novel re-emerge in the narrative through Tyler's perspective as the writer of the letter, and it returns to Tyler's plea directed at a global community but it is also a community that is without referent because it is anonymous and unknown. The novel thus begins and ends by speaking to a subject who is spatially dislocated, thus it contains utopian possibilities but they are held in suspension.

That Mala, or rather, Tyler, resorts to spatial tropes reflects the limitation of our abilities to re-imagine a world where space does not connote domination. The novel complicates the claims of place-based identities without discarding

35 Mootoo, 86–87.

36 Mootoo, 243.

them in a utopian gesture, but it also does not reduce that politics to the more commonly held opposition of place to space. Rather, both the notions of place as “local” and space as “global” are central to and subsequently also complicit with the determinations of national or ethnic identity. If literature is to play a part in dismantling globalization’s unequal power relations, it has to teach us to question space’s role in reproducing inequality. Space as an analytic within this narrative retains its utility but it remains contaminated by its dependence on cartographical imperialism.

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