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Washington Irving's *The Alhambra*: Islam in History and Myth

by Mary Anne Lutz

In 1927, a monument honoring Washington Irving was dedicated in the Hudson Valley town of Irvington, NY. Irving's bust is flanked by two statues sculpted by Daniel Chester French: to the right stands Irving's most iconic fictional character, Rip van Winkle; to the left, facing him, stands Boabdil, termed "The Last King of Granada." Most Americans today would be puzzled by the inclusion of Boabdil, the Catalan name for Abu Abdallad Muhammed XII. He was the last Muslim ruler of Granada in Islamic Spain—or al-Andalus—until the final wave of Christian conquest swept through the southern Iberian peninsula in 1492. Boabdil is a pivotal figure in part because, defeated by the armies of Isabella and Ferdinand, his departure from al-Andalus marked the end of eight centuries of Islamic rule in this region. Irving's depiction of Boabdil in his 1832 book *The Alhambra* was apparently influential enough to warrant his inclusion in the monument—indeed, to put him on the same footing as Rip van Winkle. While little known and read today, *The Alhambra* was popular through much of the 20th century. Boabdil's presence raises a crucial question about the long-term impact of *The Alhambra*: what concept of Islam is being transmitted as the book is republished over the next century?

It may surprise many Americans today to realize how persistently Irving wrote about Islam. His residence in Spain, first as a tourist in Granada in the 1820s and later as ambassador to Spain in the 1840s, allowed Irving closer contact with Muslim culture than he had enjoyed in America. As Jeffrey Einboden's investigations into Irving's notebooks from the time reveal, he was interested in Arabic and practiced paraphrasing passages from the Qur'an, based on existing English translations (73-80). As early as 1827, he began work on his biography of the Prophet Muhammed, revising periodically until its publication in 1850. Syed Ashraf Ali of the Islamic Foundation in Bangladesh has commented, "[Irving's] monumental creation entitled *The Life of Mahomet* was indeed the first sympathetic biography of the

Prophet of Islam ever to appear in the American continents" (par. 23). In contrast to Western suspicion of Islam common at the time, Irving's treatment of Muslim peoples and works is often seen as more impartial. Muhammed Al-Da'mi, for example, suggests that, rather than viewing the culture of al-Andalus as alien or Other, Irving perceived striking parallels between Granada and the early American republic. According to Al-Da'mi, what Irving learned in Spain "testified to [his] notion of a marriage of East and West" (173). I would like to take Al-Da'mi's metaphor of a "marriage" between East and West as a jumping-off point for my own consideration of *The Alhambra.* There we find a more complex—even contradictory—attempt to bridge cultural and religious differences than Al-Da'mi's comment suggests.

In *The Alhambra,* Irving enters a historiographic debate about Spain's past, centered around whether historians acknowledge, explore, or erase the long period of Islamic rule in the peninsula. As Alejandro García-Sanjuán notes, the dominant version of historical memory in Spain has been "the exclusionary view of al-Andalus associated with the notion of the Reconquista," or Christian conquest: that is, a version of Spanish history that dismisses the Islamic kingdom as an alien, invasive power and marks 1492 as the start of Spanish nationhood (128-29). Irving, however, devotes much of *The Alhambra* to recovering and celebrating Muslims' intellectual and cultural achievements during their period of rule; in this way he disputes Western biases against Islam, including some of the most common stereotypes in Orientalist discourse. As Edward Said has documented, Western discussion of "the Orient" often focused on Islam as "the epitome of the outsider against which the whole of European civilization from the Middle Ages on was founded" (70). Islam, thus fundamental to the Western construction of the Orient, was associated with barbarism, backwardness, and despotism, among other traits. Irving in many ways challenges these myths, but the text is not completely free of Orientalist assumptions. However carefully Irving researched and portrayed the history of al-Andalus, *The Alhambra* also reflects persistent Western anxieties about Islam. Specifically, the Spanish legends that Irving reproduces throughout the text reveal Western fears of Muslim power and dominance. Moreover, Irving himself conveys Orientalist stereotypes when

he portrays Muslim culture in sensual terms and seems to relegate Islamic achievements to the past. One of *The Alhambra*'s legacies, however unintentionally, may be to popularize a Spanish vein of Islamophobia and to perpetuate Orientalist myths about the historic role of Islam.

American Attitudes toward Islam

When *The Alhambra* first appeared in 1832, American readers did not hold a monolithic view of Islam. At least some commentators and writers over the years expressed tolerant, even appreciative, views. Examining US periodicals published before 1794, Robert Battistini concludes that many Americans were intellectually curious about Muslim peoples and nations (451-52). For example, *The Analectic Magazine*, during Irving's tenure as editor (1813-1814), republished one travelogue and various poems by Muslim authors. Irving's open-minded disposition, however, was not the dominant attitude.

In fact, the preponderance of works published in the decades prior to *The Alhambra*—which come from such varied sources as politicians, theologians, missionaries, travelers, and imprisoned sailors—are marked by bias if not downright hostility. As Fuad Shaban has noted, from the colonial period onward, Islamophobic stereotypes rooted in European ideology were also embedded in American political and religious discourse. Americans read in countless works that the Prophet Muhammed is an imposter, Islam is fraudulent, and its adherents are infidels. In religious discourse, such indictments were particularly stark: Denise Spellberg comments, "The dichotomies were clear and intractable on both sides of the Atlantic: Islamic imposture versus Protestant Christian truth and Ottoman tyranny versus English liberty" (24).

Consistent with religious discourse, the literary genre of the captivity story also provided a popular source of pernicious images about Islam. The capture and imprisonment of American sailors in countries such as Algiers and Tunisia—so-called Barbary nations—strengthened American motives for the Barbary wars of the late 18th to early 19th centuries. This first US military intervention overseas further fueled public interest in the captivity narrative, a genre already familiar to American readers of Indian captivity stories, but now focused on North-African Muslims. According to Peter Manseau, "Mention of Islam or

'Mohammedanism' in the press in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was largely limited to accounts of captivity—white captivity—among the supposedly barbarous Moors" (247). These accounts were widely disseminated: more than a hundred such captivity tales were in print from 1798 to 1817 (Baepler, Introduction 24). As Nikoletta Papadopoulou demonstrates, many such tales were not based on authentic, "lived" experience, but borrowed heavily from previously published works to "construct an Orient" built on "stereotypical depictions of Islamic culture" (211-12). While the stories may vary somewhat in complexity and intent, the overall effect, as in religious discourse, was to perpetuate stereotypes, reinforcing a dichotomous view of American ideology righteously opposed to Muslim tyranny and barbarism. This pattern was often gendered: Robert Battistini describes most captivity stories as "typically episodes . . . in which the captivities served as pretexts for dramatic escapes of and rescues of beautiful Christian women" (460). With Muslim captors drawn as little more than "cartoons of cruelty" (462), such stories were designed to inflame American bias and to strengthen a nascent sense of national identity.

Responding to this ideological context, in *The Alhambra* Irving offers his transatlantic audience a more reasoned depiction of Islam, one rooted in his cautious approach to historical research. The resulting book is not itself a rigorous history, however, but a discordant mix of Irving's relatively sober scholarship and fantastic legends recounted by the Spaniards he met. Therein lies one problem: while Irving's historical narration is more evenhanded, typically admiring of Islamic culture, most of the legends are little more than Spanish propaganda against the Muslims, reinforcing the same stereotypes as the American captivity narratives. Moreover, *The Alhambra* also reveals traces of Orientalism in Irving's uncritical use of certain "Eastern" stereotypes.

Washington Irving and the History of al-Andalus

Little more than a decade after the second Barbary war ended in 1815, Washington Irving resided for twelve weeks at the heart of the last outpost of al-Andalus—in the Alhambra, the Palace of Granada. During those weeks in 1829, Irving studied the Palace's architecture, including its Arabic inscriptions. He

collected tales from Spanish residents, and, although he almost exclusively encountered Spanish Christians, he also conversed with a Muslim shopkeeper. Notably, Irving visited the library of Seville to comb archival records. All this activity contributed to his portrait of Granada as a cosmopolitan hub of al-Andalus.

First, it is important to acknowledge where Irving's treatment of Islamic history in this region deliberately counters the biases found in American and Spanish histories and stories. Irving highlights the trait many present-day scholars have found most notable about al-Andalus, particularly during stable periods of Muslim rule: *convivencia*. Eric Calderwood defines *convivencia*, or "living together," as "the supposedly harmonious coexistence of Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the medieval Iberian Peninsula" (31). In Irving's account, despite friction and occasional hostile outbreaks, Muslims treated Jews and Christians as People of the Book rather than as religious enemies. Notably, Irving contrasts the "bigot zeal" of the Christian crusaders to the more tolerant spirit of the Muslim rulers, who were less likely to persecute or exile Christians and Jews or force them to convert (242). Such religious tolerance fostered a vibrant, prosperous, and progressive society, one in which scholars of different faiths collaborated, and learning in all areas—arts, agriculture, technology, and science—flourished. Describing the impact of Arabic learning on Europe, Irving comments, the "superior knowledge" that Arabs brought to Gothic Spain (248) shed light on "benighted Europe" (255). While subject to his own cultural biases, Irving was nonetheless able to recognize and extol Muslim achievements.

As present-day scholars interrogate American portrayals of Islam, Irving is a crucial writer to consider precisely because of his own satiric critiques of Western historiography. In works such as "The Money Diggers," Irving dramatizes historical accounting as a power struggle, contesting whose version of New York history (in this case, the English or the Dutch) will prevail. In earlier works, his skepticism of Western histories is even more explicit. For example, Irving satirizes European historians for their attempts to justify the extermination of Native-American peoples (*A History of New York*, ch. 5), and he repudiates Cotton Mather's histories of colonial America as "prejudiced and passionate narrations" ("Philip of Pokanoket" 240). Therefore, he approaches his research on Granada with due

caution and skepticism. While relying primarily on the Jesuit library of Seville, Irving deliberately seeks out Arab sources, typically as a corrective.

For example, when Irving assesses historical claims against Boabdil, he judges them "slanders." Weighing the specific charge that Boabdil massacred a rival faction, the Abencerrages, Irving assures his readers, "I have examined all the Arabian authorities I could get access to, through the medium of translation, and have found nothing to justify these dark and hateful accusations" (83). Of one purportedly Arab source, "The Civil Wars of Granada," Irving comments that it has "usurped" the authority of real history: bearing "internal evidence of [the writer's] falsity," it could never have been written by a Muslim (83). Due to Irving's critical sifting of evidence, the historical portions of *The Alhambra* offer a concrete record of Muslim accomplishments and portray Boabdil as a mostly sympathetic, if tragic, figure. In her recent reconsideration of Boabdil as a historic figure, Elizabeth Drayson contends that Irving "saw through the demonizing legend" of Boabdil. She commends Irving's careful examination of sources, a process that allowed him to "draw out the complexity of the young king's situation" as he navigated both internal divisions and external threats (172).

Irving also notes that historians' accusations against Boabdil, claims that have "passed into ballads, dramas, and romances[,] . . . have taken too thorough possession of the public mind to be eradicated" (82-83). Irving is thus alert to the way popular literary genres such as the romance can indoctrinate the public through false narratives. Nonetheless, he too rarely places into critical perspective the Spanish stories that are embedded in *The Alhambra*.

Romantic Legends and Islamophobia

When Irving relays the romance legends recounted by his Spanish guides and companions, he labels them "fanciful traditions" (174). However, he does not subject these tales to the same analysis and critique as he does Western histories or present them in a context to prompt audience skepticism. Of the romance tales featuring Christian and Muslim characters, few run counter to the Islamophobic thrust of Spanish ideology. One tale that does, "The Legend of Prince Ahmed al-Kamel," could even be said to embody the principle of *convivencia*. A Muslim

prince and Christian princess must overcome religious obstacles in order to marry. They succeed, in part, with the assistance of a wise Muslim owl and a magic carpet originally belonging to Solomon, woven with “Hebrew and Chaldaic characters” (150). In the end, facilitated in part by Jewish power, all is happily reconciled in a marriage of two faiths, with concord between two kingdoms, Muslim and Christian.

Few of these legends offer such respectful treatment of Islam in relation to Christianity. In fact, featuring Muslim captors and Christian prisoners, most perform the same ideological work as the Barbary captivity narratives in America, while in this case reinforcing the anti-Muslim ideology of the Reconquista. In “The Legend of the Three Beautiful Princesses,” for example, a Spanish Christian woman, captured by the Moors and married to King Mohamed El Hayzari, converts to Islam. Their three daughters, beautiful princesses raised as Muslims, are kept as prisoners by their father, “immured” in a Moorish fortress (178). Their subsequent escape is couched in erotic terms: liberated by three Spanish cavaliers, the princesses “[cling] to their Christian knights,” eager to renounce Islam and to be “received in the bosom of the church . . . [and] made regular Christians” (191). Not only the princesses are determined to abandon Islam: even the military captain who guards the Spanish prisoners, Hussein Baba, is “anxious to be reconciled to the [Christian] church” (189)—as is the daughters’ duenna. Almost all of them flee Granada—all but the youngest daughter, Zorayda, who loses her nerve and remains behind. In a subsequent story, “Legend of the Rose of the Alhambra,” we find that Zorayda dies young; her spirit haunts the tower where she is “enchanted” until “some pure Christian” can break the spell. Generations later, she appears to a visitor, pleading to be baptized (200); only then can she find peace.

These tales, therefore, dramatize the wholesale conversion of the Muslim ruler’s household to Christianity; they symbolically erase Islam in order to reaffirm Christian hegemony. Such narratives serve the same nationalistic purpose as the religious historical pageant Irving witnesses on the Dia de la Toma, the anniversary of the Spanish Reconquista of Granada and the dissolution of Muslim rule: that is, to keep the memory of Christian triumph “fresh in the public mind” (99). Annually, Irving writes, the Spaniards “resurrect” their old armor to re-

enact the defeat of Muslim forces. They enact titillating scenes of Muslim insults to the Virgin Mary in order to revel in Christian retaliation: the crowds, Irving observes, are "completely lost in the delusions of the scene," particularly as the re-enactors playing Christians rescue "the image of the Virgin . . . from thraldom" (102). Irving portrays a culture that needs to re-animate the past; to obsess over Muslim threats to Christianity, notably Christian women; and to annihilate those supposed threats.

The romances and religious pageantry form a piece with uncanny legends of Muslim ghosts who undermine Granada, threatening to awaken, erupt into the present, and recapture the city. Irving hears many variations on the same legend during his stay: the belief that enchanted Moors from previous centuries are held, as if in suspended animation, in caves below Granada. In one such tale, narrated by an elderly military veteran, an enchanted Boabdil, his court, and his army are shut up within a mountain, only to revive and march back to the city. A Moor in the story, who disputes the "lying chronicles" of Spanish history, proclaims, "When the enchantment is broken, Boabdil will descend from the mountain at the head of this army and resume his throne in the Alhambra. . . . [he] will reconquer the Peninsula and restore it to Moslem rule" (218). These fantasies of sleeper cells poised to reclaim Granada are woven throughout the book. One of Irving's chief sources, Mateo Ximenes, tells the story of an old Spaniard who, having fallen asleep, wakes to behold the Catholic city transformed. The Cathedral and convents have vanished; he "saw nothing but Moorish mosques and minarets, and cupolas, all topped with glittering crescents, such as you see on the Barbary flags" (156). While Irving seems detached from the belief system undergirding these fantasies, he internalizes the underlying anxiety during his stay in the Alhambra. Awakened one night by loud noise, he writes, "It seemed for a moment as if the Moors were once more breaking into the town . . ." (21).

Irving's stance toward this material is, at best, unclear. He recognizes the stories and pageantry as forms of cultural indoctrination, inciting fear of Islam and asserting Christian supremacy. However, while he does not endorse this storytelling propaganda, neither does he explicitly dispel it, as he does historical inaccuracies or fabrications. He reproduces the Spanish romances with little to no commentary. In fact, the tales and

legends typically appear in self-contained chapters, isolated from his historical critiques. Irving's incorporating the legends in this way has implications for the book's later publication history. When *The Alhambra* was reprinted in the 20th century, it was often abridged, excising the historical analysis in favor of the legends. Children's versions of *The Alhambra* are revealing in this regard. A Newberry Classics edition published in 1900 does offer "The Legend of Prince Ahmed al Kamel," but more typically the editor's abridgement favors tales of Christian captives who, by one method or another, foil their Muslim captors. Likewise, the New Children's Classic edition published in 1953 selects many more tales of Christian triumph over Muslim tyranny than it does such a tolerant narrative as Prince Ahmed al-Kamel's romance. Avon, a publisher of cheap paperbacks, follows suit with a 1965 edition that popularizes many of the same Spanish tales featuring sympathetic Christians and despotic Moors. The tendency to excerpt the Spanish romances for young and popular audiences, omitting critical portions of Irving's history, makes these editions of *The Alhambra* vehicles for disseminating anti-Muslim ideas.

"The Last Sigh of the Moor"

Even with his historical material intact in *The Alhambra*, Irving's depiction of al-Andalus is problematic when, echoing Orientalist stereotypes, it positions Islam out of the mainstream of historical progress. Even as Irving admires Muslim achievements that far outstrip medieval European learning, art, and technology, he can also view these notable accomplishments through an Orientalist lens—stressing at times the "Asiatic luxury" (25) of the Alhambra, and the "dreamy repose" or "indolent enjoyment" of its "voluptuous lords" (31-32). These descriptors signal an underlying problem: as Irving depicts the ultimate legacy of Islamic rule in the peninsula, he reduces al-Andalus to an almost dreamlike, transient presence. He writes, "the Moslem empire in Spain was but a brilliant exotic that took no permanent root in the soil it embellished" (46). In this chapter of the history, Irving repeatedly insists on the disappearance of Islam, asserting, "never was the annihilation of a people more complete. . . . Where are they?" He concludes that the "Morisco-Spaniards" ruled and flourished, then "passed away" (46). While the Muslim peoples in this region were certainly persecuted until

they were formally expelled in 1609, Irving's language does not conjure up the image of an exiled people relocating across the Mediterranean to North Africa (or elsewhere), but of a people who are, in his word, utterly "annihilated." It is as if they cease to exist. In this respect, his version of history may reinforce the ideological thrust of Spanish legends that obsessively repeat the tale of Muslim erasure.

Irving's handling of Boabdil's defeat and departure from al-Andalus sounds a familiar note of finality. As such, it fails to reconsider the popular mode of depicting Boabdil at his most powerless: vanquished and exiled. This motif is later encapsulated, for example, in historical paintings such as Alfred Dehodencq's 1869 work *Farewell of Boabdil in Granada*. As he departs his former kingdom, the defeated Boabdil mournfully glances backward while his steed faces forward, the direction of his exile. Boabdil is suspended in a moment of time and between two worlds. Irving depicts Boabdil's departure in a similarly elegaic mode: "From the summit of those hills the unfortunate Boabdil cast back his last look upon Granada, and gave vent to the agony of his soul. It is the spot famous in song and story, 'The last sigh of the Moor'" (65). As Elizabeth Drayson notes, the European trope of Boabdil's "last sigh" persists in literature and elsewhere from the 16th century onward (142-43). Adopting language that describes Boabdil as if he is expiring in one last exhalation, Irving echoes rather than challenges this cliché—one that embodies the Orientalist binary that depicts Europe as triumphant and vital, the East as "defeated and distant" (Said 51).

Boabdil is too often remembered, then, through these images and legends, not as the intelligent, complex man who ruled a powerful kingdom, but as an uncanny enemy in suspended animation (a latent threat to Spanish Christian hegemony) or as a defeated, tragic figure (a symbolic containment of this threat). In this sense, French's pairing of Rip van Winkle and King Boabdil in the Irving monument is perhaps not so incongruous. Like Rip, Irving's Boabdil is, in the end, a man out of time, a transitional figure between two epochs. Rip falls asleep in the British colony of New York and wakes twenty years later in a new country, one in which he has no place. However, while Rip is eventually reintegrated into the community, there is no such resolution for Boabdil. He is forever

banished; he has breathed his "last sigh." Whatever Irving's intentions, part of the legacy of *The Alhambra* was not so much to bridge East and West, but to reduce the East to legend and consign Islam to the past.

Present-day visitors to the monument in Irvington, NY, gazing at French's statuary, might well see none of this; they might instead find French's rendering of Boabdil, equal in stature to Rip van Winkle, a testament to religious diversity and to Irving's cosmopolitanism. They might know that Islam did not vanish forever from the Iberian peninsula; rather, due to immigration patterns and religious conversions, Andalucía today has one of the largest Muslim communities in Spain (Calderwood 34). As Elizabeth Drayson points out, the Great Mosque of Granada, which opened in 2003, "has been seen as the focal point of a new Islamic revival" (179). Efforts are being made to acknowledge Al-Andalus in historical memory, reconciling the Spanish Islamic past with the present. Irving could not have forecast these recent developments, but *The Alhambra* is nonetheless relevant today for the ways in which Irving was forward-looking. First of all, he deliberately challenges some of the more conspicuous Western biases against Islam—biases that endure today in America and Europe. Moreover, the debate Irving enters over the place and meaning of al-Andalus in Spain's history is still vigorously contested by contemporary scholars and politicians (García-Sanjuán 132-41). *The Alhambra* is also important to re-examine because of its shortcomings: namely, that its version of Islamic history bears the imprint of 19th-century Orientalism while its Spanish stories promote anti-Islamic sentiments. With nationalism on the rise in the West, we still grapple today with the critical issues *The Alhambra* raises about the ideological bent of historical interpretation and storytelling.

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Three Approaches to Bridging the Academic Literacy Gap

By Christian Aguiar, Dorothy Phaire, and Ahmed Wright

Research from the American Association of Community Colleges suggests that the majority of community-college students are academically underprepared for college-level coursework in English and math. This is neither a new issue nor one that is likely to go away. Scholars from multiple disciplines have taken note of the challenges first-year community-college students face. One interdisciplinary study concludes that, "Whatever the reasons may be, the bottom line is that the majority of students do not possess the skills necessary to effectively communicate in a written format that will enable them to become successful upon graduation" (Defazio et al. 34). As scholars and practitioners struggle to help underprepared students, they have simultaneously sought out ways to conceptualize what students don't know in a way that is helpful, encouraging, and constructive. Catherine Boiarsky emphasizes this when she argues that the challenge is not that students come to college unprepared, but that "they are prepared for a different environment" (18). How can we help students recognize what they don't know—the ways that they might be unprepared for college success—without stigmatizing them or suggesting that they've already failed?

One solution has been the notion of "academic literacy." The academic-literacy approach views all academic writing as a type of language or code, one that carries with it complex conventions for syntax, grammar, vocabulary, and structure. It recognizes that, in order for a student to write an analytic essay, for example, the student must first learn what analysis is, then how to perform analysis, what vocabulary is appropriate for analysis, and how they might structure that analysis. Theresa Lillis and Mary Scott use the term academic literacy "to signify courses intended to enable student writers to meet the demands of writing in the university. Such courses can range from instruction in the organization of paragraphs and the setting out

of references, to courses on how to write a dissertation" (6). Courses such as these reduce the stigma that learners may feel by emphasizing that the training is in *academic* literacy—not in literacy as such, nor in English, writing, or any other field that students might reasonably feel they should already be prepared for. By intentionally focusing on the process of writing for academic settings, such courses help overcome the gap in preparation.

Introduction to Approaches to Fostering Academic Literacy

Instructors should be open with students about the challenges of academic writing. Students need to know that "reading, reasoning, and writing in a specific discipline is difficult for native and non-native speakers" alike, and, therefore, specific training in "academic literacy" is critical (Wingate and Tribble 481). This helps students frame their own struggles within a wider context while also establishing clear stakes. A student who struggles with the first essay in a composition class needs to know that this isn't a personal failure, but, rather, a completely normal step on the way to becoming a competent writer in a new discipline. It makes it clear to the students that what's at stake in their writing is not necessarily literacy as such, but rather a particular type of literacy—*academic* literacy.

Third, instructors would do well to be intentional, upfront, and direct about how they present the skills, trying to create scaffolding for students both in terms of how they present material and how they construct assignment sequences. If we know that students need to work with paragraph structure several times and have designed a series of activities and workshops to make that possible, we should also let students know why they're completing this sequence. Doing so is likely to increase student engagement as it enables students to see more clearly the connections between different course objectives or competencies, as well as the value of each.

A final, critical element is that students must be encouraged to engage in self-reflection about both the writing process and their own engagement with the course material. The ability to think metacognitively about the writing process helps students build connections between their own writing and that of their peers. It also helps students bridge gaps across disciplines.

As Defazio et al. have found, "the reflective process—the ability to critique one's own work as well as the work of peers" is a critical element of successful writing no matter the discipline (36). This speaks to the continued value of workshops, both of the full-class and the peer-to-peer variety. Such workshops can go a long way to encouraging thoughtful self-reflection; however, for those workshops to be maximally effective, instructors must provide training in how to conduct workshops, construct clear scaffolding for their assignment sequences, and offer an explanation of how the workshops help build academic literacy.

Taken collectively, these four insights structure our approach to academic literacy. We hope that it is clear how each of these elements contributes to an overall approach that is learner-centered, compassionate, and effective. In the sections that follow, we explore three specific classroom techniques that apply the insights of the academic-literacy approach to community-college classrooms.

Using Deliberative Workshops and Class-Generated Revision Checklists by Christian Aguiar

One of the core elements of college-composition pedagogy for some time has been the writing workshop. It can take a range of forms, from the full-class workshop borrowed from creative writing, to peer review, to workshops targeted at developing specific skills or techniques. The workshop's value lies in its ability to do many of the things we've discussed above, such as developing specific academic skills and encouraging students to be more reflective in their own writing practice.

One way to intensify the latter effect is by having students design their own revision checklists, evaluation criteria, and/or rubrics for use in in-class workshops. This approach draws on emerging work in the field of democratization, especially work by the scholar Kaitlyn Haynal. Haynal suggests that the "general education" curriculum must be reclaimed as a site of democratization, a place where students learn the skills necessary to become active, meaningful participants in democracy. Haynal suggests several ways to bring democratic values into the classroom, including debate, discussion, deliberation, and the fostering of community. The activity described below has the potential to engage all these elements. In

the process, the activity helps students develop a better understanding for the assignment they're responding to, feel more comfortable providing feedback to their peers, and feel more engaged with the assignment itself.

The premise is simple: before students engage in any type of in-class writing workshop, they should first work together to generate a checklist—or a rubric, depending on the degree to which the instructor wants to open the assessment process to students—of criteria they will use to assess the paper being workshopped. This is a natural outgrowth of the standard skills-based workshop process in which the instructor provides specific skills, techniques, or criteria for the class to focus on, but shifts the focus from instructor-centered to student-centered. Students first work alone to identify three-to-five criteria that they think must be present in a strong essay. Of course, the model is flexible: the instructor might narrow the scope from essay to paragraph or even thesis statement or narrow the focus to strictly issues of grammar, source materials, structure, etc.

This process not only forms the foundation for subsequent discussion, providing students with the opportunity to gather their thoughts, but also offers an opportunity for student reflection, one of the key elements of academic literacy approaches. Once the reflection is completed, the entire class then engages in a deliberative, town-hall-style discussion in which they determine, as a group, which criteria should be included in a full-class checklist or rubric and how those criteria should be worded. In doing so, students engage in meaningful discussion with each other about both the writing and evaluation processes. Depending on the instructor's preference, this activity could engage the process of debate to a greater or lesser degree. For example, a town-hall-meeting approach would look like this: one or more students or the instructor serves as moderator, with individual students offering suggestions, amendments, challenges, and, eventually, assent to a particular element. Time is the main determinant here since a robust, debate-heavy, rubric-generation session will take a significant portion of a class period.

The final product of this activity is a document that students can then use to guide them through collaborative workshops. Again, the model is flexible: this list may be used to guide a full-class, instructor-guided workshop, small-group workshops, or

peer review. However it is used, the document helps students understand exactly what they need to look for in the workshop, giving structure to a process that can otherwise be nebulous or confusing for students. The guide provides scaffolding for the workshop in much the same way explicit directions or criteria from the instructor might; however, this approach takes things a step further by having students themselves generate the criteria.

Incorporating this approach into three gateway Composition I courses over the past three semesters has yielded encouraging feedback. Electronic surveys were administered immediately following the use of the activity in class in order to gauge student response. Students were asked to reflect on how (if at all) they think the activity helped them, using four specific measures indicated by the research into academic literacy discussed above. Results indicate that students found the activity helped them "understand the assignment better" (91.67%), "feel more engaged with the assignment" (87.5%), "give their peers better feedback" (83.3%), and "understand the assessment criteria" (85.7%). These results suggest the value of deliberative processes in education: students who are able to discuss the criteria for success on a given assignment together seem to be both more engaged with the assignment and more aware of its elements.

A Student-Centered Approach to the Writing Process by Dorothy Phaire

Another popular approach for enhancing "academic literacy" among community-college students is to implement a student-centered writing process. A student-centered writing process includes "low-stakes" reflective writing, especially at the early stages. This approach guides students towards revision and crafting more polished writing based on well-established rhetorical patterns of development, such as narrative writing, description, comparison-contrast, cause-effect, and argument writing.

Education scholar and professor, Peter Elbow, maintains that instructors should give students helpful, supportive feedback on their papers, instead of pointing out a multitude of grammar mistakes (52). This is not to say that grammar skills and correct sentence structure usage are not important competencies for writing, but that pointing out every comma splice or dangling

modifier at the initial stages of their writing does not help to propel the student forward in generating ideas.

Beginning writers benefit from a more self-empowering approach to the writing process, which promotes their free expression of ideas rather than a strictly skill-based model that mainly points out deficiencies in student writing. Teacher-Scholars Mary R. Lea and Brian V. Street state, “One of the main purposes of the research has been to move away from a skills-based, deficit model of student writing and to consider the complexity of writing practices that are taking place at [the] degree level in universities” (158). Student writing should be viewed from a lens of free expression of their cultural and social differences. Student writing should not be labeled merely as “good” or “bad.” Using a student-centered writing process to enhance academic literacies is an effective approach to teaching writing to community-college students.

Using a student-centered writing process offers a framework for beginning writers to gain academic literacy because this model is designed to encourage reluctant or insecure beginner student writers to move past their fear of writing. A student-centered writing process presents the best approach because it focuses on whether the student’s writing makes valid and thought-provoking points that have meaning for a reader. There is a tendency when writing to forget one’s focus. Rankin states, “As the writing goes on, it is not at all unusual for writers to lose focus and forget their original intentions” (12). This propensity to veer off topic is true for both experienced and inexperienced writers. Readers appreciate it when a writer provides them with meaningful substance and can be clear and concise in written expression. The example of a model writing process provided below illustrates one that can be used for writing an assignment.

At the beginning of the process for crafting a writing assignment, students are asked to identify a problem they would like to address or explore in order to prepare the groundwork for critical thinking. Upon identifying a problem, students are usually able to form an issue question about the problem. In other words, the problem statement is converted into an issue question. Nosich states, “Since all reasoning is about some question, it’s always relevant to ask what is the question being addressed. . . . Questions are vital to all critical thinking” (53).

One example of a question that a student generated to address an issue that the student perceived as a problem was this: Is gentrification in urban areas hurting the poor? Another example that a student saw as a problem and converted into a question was this: Should the Electoral College be abolished in favor of electing the president through the popular vote? These issue question examples represent only a small fraction of the problems that students have been interested in addressing for a research-writing assignment. This process is student-centered because students are directed to choose topics they are interested in writing about. For instance, one of the questions students are asked to ponder in the early planning phase of the academic-writing process is this: Are you sufficiently interested in and engaged with this issue to inspire your audience to become interested also? Allowing students to become invested in selecting their own topics from a wide range of arguable issues engages their curiosity in wanting to learn more by thoroughly researching the topic.

The writing process starts with an interesting question, whether the writing is for an academic-writing project like a research paper or a creative-writing project. Students can pose different types of questions depending on the genre, so starting off a writing project with a question of interest presents a clear scaffolding approach for students.

The next stage of the writing process after students come up with an interesting question is to initiate preliminary research, especially if they do not have any direct experience with or knowledge about the topic. In this case, after reading a few articles, students should let their thoughts run free by following any of the common pre-writing strategies, such as freewriting, journaling, outlining, mapping, or sometimes a combination of any of these activities. In most cases, freewriting helps students to launch their ideas in an effortless way. When students have sufficient personal experience and knowledge about their topics, they are encouraged to take the plunge into a freewrite, for example.

In academic writing the answer to one's issue question becomes the thesis statement or claim if writing an argument paper. From these questions, ideas seem to fall into place best when students are guided towards taking a "broad stroke" by free-writing, brainstorming, journaling, outlining, clustering, or

mapping out their thoughts. There is another pre-writing strategy used to generate ideas known as cubing, which is not as straightforward as freewriting. Cubing entails six different ways of looking at a topic: describing, comparing, associating, analyzing, applying, and arguing. For students who are true novices of the writing process, a freewrite may be the easiest starting approach.

During a freewriting or brainstorming pre-writing strategy, students are guided by their issue question(s). They write uninterrupted about the issue for a designated period of time, such as eight-to-ten minutes. A freewrite resembles unedited, free-form paragraphs in which ideas and thoughts are allowed to spring forth. Students can then read the contents of their freewrites to see where ideas can be shaped into clear points. Afterwards, their ideas can be funneled into a narrower focus by forming a rough outline or using mind mapping, for instance. There are a number of effective pre-writing strategies that students can use to launch a serious writing project. The writing-process examples that have been offered highlight only a general overview of pre-writing strategies with which most educators are familiar. The important point is to allow students to choose whichever pre-writing strategy works best for them rather than to dictate the same approach for everyone in the class when promoting a "student-centered" writing process. The pre-writing strategies that students decide to adopt when beginning the writing process are best left up to the students.

At this point in the writing process, students are engaging in what's called a "controlled" brain dump (controlled in the sense that they should not let their mind venture too far off-topic). However, it should also be made clear to your students that they should not censor or self-edit their writing at this early phase. Repeating the freewriting activity as often as needed tends to generate more questions, which requires students to begin conducting serious research to find supporting articles on their subjects. This writing process involves a good deal of critical reading, annotating/highlighting, and processing information to decide what to keep and what to discard.

At some point after sufficient research, students are ready to write a first draft. However, it should be stressed to students that this model uses an iterative writing process. Freewriting or any one of the other pre-writing strategies

described as a discovery step may need to be repeated in order to re-capture a focused claim or key point. Thus, the cycle repeats itself as often as needed to reach a working draft, beginning with more questions, back to research to find answers, followed by more outlining/freewriting, and revising their working-draft versions. This cycle continues until students have crafted a final draft.

When close to a second or third draft, the instructor may wish to implement peer-review activities and provide peer-review guide sheets for students to follow if they wish. However, in order to maintain a student-centered approach to peer reviewing, students are free to create their own feedback criteria and strategies. This way, the instructor can leave it up to students to create their own method of giving a peer partner feedback on a draft.

Empirical evidence has shown that it's not advisable to initiate peer reviews too soon when students have produced only their first drafts. There are two reasons to avoid peer reviews on beginning drafts. First, it can impede the creative and critical-thinking process whereby students may be unintentionally steered down a path that is not where their true focus lies. The student-writer needs time to discover his or her central area of focus. This is because another reader (the peer) may not grasp the intent of the writing if it's too early in the writing process. Second, student ideas will tend to drastically change as students engage in more substantial research, learn more, and ask more questions. Thus, planning for a peer review too early can actually waste the student reviewer's time.

Therefore, it is recommended that instructors wait until at least the second or third draft before encouraging students to submit their work for feedback from others. This timeframe will provide ample time for students to conduct research and go back over their drafts to solidify their claims before being asked to seek feedback from peers. In addition to seeking feedback from peers in the class, students are always encouraged to set up one-on-one consultations to receive instructor feedback on drafts. Between peer review and instructor feedback and receiving ample time to follow an iterative writing process, students will have a solid foundation for revising their writing and achieving academic literacy in a low-stress, encouraging way.

The “student-centered” writing process not only utilizes a step-by-step approach to writing but also seeks to encourage freedom of expression among novice writers and promotes cultural and social diversity in student perspectives. Community-college students tend to find this student-centered approach to developing their writing proficiencies as empowering and less intimidating to them as beginning writers.

Helping Students Succeed Through the Use of Instructional Scaffolding in High-Stakes Writing by Ahmad Wright

Teaching writing can be a lot like adding stock to soup. There is always another element to add for taste, another layer to improve understanding, until the final product stands on its own. A student who is knowledgeable about college processes is often better equipped to adapt to assistance offered in the classroom by an instructor. Notwithstanding the variables to account for in terms of levels of prior student preparation, breaking down difficult projects into manageable pieces for students is valuable for instructors in any discipline, especially as the level of difficulty of assignments increases. In composition, high-stakes writing assignments could benefit from adding an instructional scaffolding approach to help students better comprehend assignments and succeed in class.

Scaffolding high-stakes writing assignments is an important part of providing insight to students who have challenges realizing the big picture of a project and have challenges taking the next step engaging critical-thinking skills. The initial concept of “instructional scaffolding” has been around since 1976. This term, created by David Wood, Jerome S. Bruner, and Gail Ross, “describes how an interaction between a tutor and a child concerning how to construct a wooden pyramidal puzzle employs a 'scaffolding' process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (Pea 425). However, Allyson Skene and Sarah Fedko of the University of Toronto at Scarboro Centre for Teaching and Learning are a couple of the many experts who have widened the parameters of this “layering” technique to refer to “structuring assignments and course material in a systematic way to support your learning objectives and make the goals and process transparent to students” (1).

Providing students with the support they need to be successful with assignments that increase in their level of difficulty is the hallmark of most first-year composition classes. This is especially true when teaching the high-stakes writing assignments, where smaller tasks must be completed before assuming more difficult ones. The stages included in one online scaffolding guide are “Selecting a topic,” Finding background information/Presearch,” “Research,” “Source evaluation,” “Draft,” and Final Draft” (“Designing Research Assignments”). Each stage is *scaffolded* into bit-sized steps. Here, one must have a clear definition of what constitutes a proper source and how and where to identify a credible source before researching a source. The extent to which assignment breakdown, the syllabus, use of technology, and other instructor-driven factors promote the intricacies and support needed for students to grasp concepts is key.

Skene and Fedko suggest that some of the payoff for scaffolding, creating a classroom environment where students are able to engage pieces of larger assignments early, will promote further intensity in learning, reduce the temptation to plagiarize, and better engage higher levels of critical-thinking skills on the scale of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Since the toughest part of course design is often accounting for how students will realistically respond to an assignment, this technique will also aid instructors in devising practical assignment outcomes.

Also, the extent to which a topic motivates issues and argument can affect the direction of a student's research. Each part of the process calls for a degree of academic literacy in terms of the discipline, time management, and methodology involved in each process leading to the construction of the proposal for the research paper. Educational Researcher Bob Fecho in *Innovative Writing Instruction* reminds us in an academic environment to “immerse ourselves in looking closely at the transactions we make across cultures” (qtd. in Kinloch 95). Instructors must get to know their students and recognize and anticipate the barriers they may encounter in the learning process. Providing students with focused help on the components of difficult projects is a way to get the most out of their learning capacity in that moment.

This “layering” can present the intricacies of building the research-paper proposal. Examples of instructional

scaffolding for high-stakes writing assignments may also include defining what research is in preparation for considering a final research- paper topic, presenting a video or TED talk on the subject, or having students post and discuss suggestions on a peer-to-peer discussion board before they actually begin research-paper proposals in preparation for the larger assignment—the research paper. Then students may begin analyzing evidence within a range of research sources in order to align themselves with a topic of interest that motivates them to become engaged in the later stages of writing and synthesizing the details of the proposal. In addition, preparing students for an essay exam or any graded exam that involves writing could include a scaffolding approach to modeling a form of learning and preparation for such a high-stakes writing event.

This “breadcrumbs” approach builds upon prior, smaller assignments to motivate students into action, especially students who are still realizing their confidence within a college setting and are discovering how it is they learn and study. It may also reduce the level of frustration on the part of instructors who are often plagued with the mystery of why their students are not progressing as far as they should in terms of the critical depth of their writing assignments. This teaching approach can go a long way towards student success.

Conclusion

One of the core insights of the academic-literacy approach is that students need more help than what the typical instructor may think engaging with and understanding both specific writing assignment requirements and the process that will achieve the desired results. The three approaches above offer modifications of some tried-and-true teaching approaches in order to emphasize this kind of intentionality in how those assignments and activities are presented to students. For example, the use of class-generated rubrics fosters student-driven conversations about grading criteria; in so doing, students engage more meaningfully with what the assignment asks them to do. Similarly, allowing students to become more autonomous in the initial stages of their writing processes increases their levels of confidence. Finally, by using a “breadcrumbs” approach to scaffolding writing assignments, each tier of support

encourages students to accept and apply feedback towards assignments in a way that is both empowering and purposeful.

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Tortoiseshell

By Albert Kapikian

"*The clever device of the lyre, it is said, was invented by Hermes*"

--Philostratus of Lemnos

Soon I will be holding
(you are dying) your hand.

I could promise you that I
will not be crying,

but you are the only one to whom
I will not lie. If my gift

is rhyme, I apologize
(in advance) for not being

able to describe that country
in verse, for I cannot

rhyme what I refuse
to rehearse.

Instead, I will sit here and spy
into each decade

with each decade's trinket of my advance—
the Tin Man (on my windowsill),

the typewriter,
          the Christmas tree,

and now, God,
          the parrot.

Tenderness was not
          a science—

still you graded on a curve.
          It was the jump start,

the Lucretian swerve,
          the Paraclete,

I didn't deserve.

Pablo Berger's *Blancanieves* (2012): The Gender Codification Update of the Bullfighting Heroine

By Paula Talero Álvarez

Introduction

Media technologies are not neutral. On the contrary, they have been used through history to codify, intentionally or not, different assumptions about gender, race, sexuality, and class. Humans and technologies coevolve, as different human-based constructions and modes of understanding the world are entrenched in those technologies. These constructions exist even in those technologies that may, at first glance, appear "objective." Lita Gitelman, for instance, notes in *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, that gender and cultural differences were built into home phonographs from the start. For Gitelman, recorded sound is an exemplary instance of cultural production, since this medium was deeply defined by users and the changing condition of use (83). In this context, man started to be constructed as creator and woman as user, and the concept of "consumer" shaped as feminine. According to Gitelman, "in the case of early recorded sound, mediation seems clearly to have involved assumptions regarding women and their roles in society" (84). The same way photography was optimized to highlight white skin color, as Rosie Cima argues in her article, "How Photography Was Optimized for White Skin Color," mediated sound was normalized in relation to women's voices, following Gitelman. Gitelman states that "modern forms of mediation are in part defined by normative constructions of difference, whether gender, racial or other versions of difference" (84). Simone Browne exemplifies in her article, "Digital Epidermalization: Race, Identity and Biometrics," how biometric technologies are also codifying gender, race, and citizenship. According to Browne, technologies cannot be neutral since they are "designed and operated by real people to sort real people" (144).

This essay is concerned with the specific medium of film and with how gender normativities have pervaded this medium in different times and locations. Specifically, the essay discusses how women have been portrayed in film and how ideas related to femininity, womanhood, and gender politics pervade our fictional narratives. In order to illustrate how these ideas have been codified in film through time and in different contexts, this essay particularly focuses on depictions of womanhood in two films released decades apart: The Disney movie, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Walt Disney, 1937), and the recent adaptation by the Spanish filmmaker Pablo Berger, *Blancanieves* (2012). Embracing the feminist practice of content analysis as defined by Patricia Lina Leavy in 2007, according to which “feminist researchers employ content analysis in unique ways and ask questions that would otherwise go unexplored” (224), this essay argues that Berger’s film deconstructs the original tale and offers insightful updates to the traditional characterization of Snow White.

The story of Snow White, the innocent and pure heroine who must escape from her evil stepmother, is one of the most famous and widespread fairytales in the Western cultural tradition. Nonetheless, locating the “original” Snow White is far from an easy endeavor. The “Snow White” retrieved by the Grimm brothers is only one of many versions of the traditional fairytale. The authorship of the work is multifaceted and unclear since the text has been created by multiple authors who belong to different European cultural traditions. As Maria Tatar suggests, “the many versions of ‘Snow White’ heard by the Grimms suggest the richness of folkloric variation and remind us how we have allowed stories that once circulated freely to ossify into definitive versions” (“Snow White and the Huntsman”). The folkloric variations of the tale are only the tip of the iceberg. Today we find an overwhelming number of literary versions of the text, along with remediations of Snow White in a handful of media and formats, such as illustrations, paintings, costumes, videogames, performances, and films. Each of these new works uses different concepts and conveys different meanings that may differ either a little or greatly from the traditional fairytale. The new play, book, or artwork can take several paths: it may try to remain true to the original work, result in a satiric commentary, convey new significations, or attempt to deconstruct the original.

The most famous film adaptation of the story is Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, but the film industry has depicted Snow White with other colors as well. *Snow White and the Three Stooges* (Walter Lang, Frank Tashlin, 1961), *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (Michael Cohn, 1997) and *Snow White: The Sequel* (Picha, 2007) are only a few examples.[1] In 2012 alone, three films with Snow White as the main character were released: *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Rupert Sanders), *Mirror Mirror* (Tarsem Singh), and *Blancanieves* (Pablo Berger). In each adaptation of the story, the filmmakers reframe the values and assumptions that are implicit in the narrative, including different nuances in the new material. By analyzing two representative films from a story that belongs to our collective imaginary, this essay explores how gender codification is entrenched in this medium and how it varies through time and space.

***Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Walt Disney, 1937)**

Our Western and contemporary construction of gender has been created according to a dualistic opposition based on supposedly biological differences between two sexes. It also presupposes different behaviors and aptitudes for women and men. In *Making a Difference: Psychology and the Construction of Gender*, Rachel T. Hare-Mustin and Jeanne Marecek explain how femininity has been traditionally identified with qualities such as "passivity, nurturance, adornment, and virtue," whereas masculinity has been associated with "agonistic activity, ritualistic combat, overt sexuality, and possessive individualism" (43). Canadian scholar Nancy Taber asserts that stereotypes of men and women still abound in popular culture, despite the myriad of ways in which men and women can enact gender. For Taber, "a closer analysis suggests that, instead of demonstrating women's equality with men, their representations and experiences exhibit a complex relationship in that they are each still constrained by societal expectations of gender norms" (95). In order to highlight how specific forms of masculinity and femininity are privileged over others, Nancy Taber refers to the work of the Australian scholar R. W. Connell and her book *Masculinities*. Connell suggests in her book that these forms are temporal, cultural, and geospatial, and, consequently, variable, complex, and adaptive. However, Connell continues, "the forms

of hegemonic masculinity that are privileged in contemporary western society most often prescribe that men be tough, strong, and independent, while those of emphasized femininity, in concomitant contrast, most often prescribe that women be sweet, vulnerable, and dependent" (qtd. in Taber 96-97). She also emphasizes that these are not the forms that men and women necessarily enact, but "they are often held up as standards and expectations."

In the 1930s, the ideal Western woman was presented as sweet and fragile, highly feminine, religious, romantic, and devoted to the care of the household and the kids.[2] The depiction of Snow White in Disney's film is aligned with this understanding of womanhood. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is one of the first and most famous adaptations of the folktale, a full-length animated musical feature film. The film portrays a sweet, innocent, beautiful, and docile image of the heroine, and it establishes hegemonic ideals of white femininity. The name of the protagonist in the original folktale reinforces the association of beauty and whiteness since her skin is "as white as snow" (Brothers Grimm 21), an association that is later recuperated in the Disney adaptation. As Tatar asserts, "only the Grimm's version of the story alludes to the heroine's complexion in her name. Their fair-skinned heroine became, through the Disney film, an icon of feminine beauty for the latter half of the twentieth century" (*The Annotated Brothers Grimm* 240).

The representation of the princess is inevitably linked to the social and cultural ideas of womanhood of the time—ideas that locate womanhood within vulnerability, the household, motherhood, Christian values, and heterosexual love. The Disney heroine is defined by her naivety and helplessness. She is gentle, kind, and patient. Her figure is built in strong opposition to the image of the stepmother: the stepmother's exaggerated stereotypical femininity leads her to vanity, and she is wicked and filled with cruel jealousy. Snow White offers a safer version of femininity, a white femininity that is never questioned: the princess wears heels even when running away from her stepmother through the forest. When Snow White is alone, without the company of men, she is shown as incapable, vulnerable, and susceptible to all sorts of calamities, such as getting lost, not finding her way in the forest, and falling into the trap of her stepmother.

The personality traits of Snow White are also closely linked to assumptions of female affection, the household, and house labor. As soon as she enters the house of the seven dwarfs, she notices the dirt and the messiness of the house and decides to clean. She is the quintessential "happy housewife," who renders her efforts and hard labor invisible through music. Snow White's representation is associated with conceptions of womanhood as motherhood: she treats the dwarfs like children (despite their being grown men), takes care of them, kisses them goodbye in the morning, insists on the importance of washing their hands before supper, etc. Her idealized image of womanhood is also created around Christian religion: we see Snow White praying before going to bed. The aspiration of romantic, heterosexual love also appears at the beginning of the movie with the first song and becomes a constant in the entire film.

***Blancanieves* (Pablo Berger, 2012)**

The adaptation *Blancanieves*, a Spanish silent film directed by Pablo Berger and released in 2012, portrays a unique Snow White: a brave girl called Carmen, who becomes a bullfighter in the Andalusia of the 1920s. In Berger's film, the appropriation of the iconic text of Snow White is transformed to meet the needs and preferences of the cinema audiences of twenty-first century Spain. *Blancanieves* also deconstructs hegemonic ideas related to femininity and womanhood and codifies new gender conceptions. Leavy asserts that "just as texts can be an integral part in creating and maintaining the status quo, so too can they help challenge long-held beliefs and practices" (230). The film is a representative example of the updated use of an iconic text to rethink and reframe gender politics.

While *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* exploits to the fullest the technology available at the time (classical animation, color, and sound), Berger's film revisits the techniques of early film. Like *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011), *Blancanieves* is a silent black-and-white movie released in the twenty-first century. Both the Disney film and Berger's reinterpretation of the tale emphasize the role of music, but while *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* combines both musical numbers and spoken word, in *Blancanieves* the spoken dialogue has vanished, and the narrative is conveyed through diegetic and non-diegetic sound and the actors' performances. Although the plot is based on the

traditional story of Snow White, Berger's approach is remarkably original. His story develops in the city of Seville, in the South of Spain, while the cultural framework of the Disney adaptation is loosely associated with the German heritage of the original tale. Berger also changes the temporal frame and locates the story in the 1920s, versus the atemporal setting of the Disney version.

There are many other instances of uniqueness in Berger's work. The dwarfs, for instance, are commonly described in the many versions of the story as "sometimes miners but sometimes compassionate robbers, thieves, bears, wild men, or ogres" (Tatar, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* 241). This is the first time that the dwarfs (six instead of seven) work in bullfighting shows. Berger sought to distance himself from classical adaptations and create a new story that unified the world of bullfighting and the narrative of Snow White, "almost a marriage" of Mérimée's *Carmen* and *Blancanieves* (Berger qtd. in Brown). The director has asserted that the film is not an adaptation: "I could have even called the film 'Carmen.' . . . That's why there are only six dwarves and not seven. I'm not even loyal to anything, even with the end. There's a semantic, postmodern game when I say, 'We'll call you Blancanieves'" (Berger, interviewed by Emma Brown). The movie pleased the critics and scooped 10 Goyas, the Spanish Oscars, including best film and screenplay (Matheou). The critics reacted positively, as The Guardian's chief film critic Peter Bradshaw's review exemplifies:

> All I can say is that there's a flash of pure inspiration, and unmistakable, in this extraordinarily enjoyable film, a silent-movie melodrama version of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves set in southern Spain in 1910. It feels saturated with pleasure: it is extremely pleasurable to watch, and shows every sign of having been extremely pleasurable to make.

This version of the tale includes a renovated Snow White, a lovely character that at the same time surprises the viewers with her courage and strength. Like her father, she becomes a bullfighter, a profession that in Spain still constitutes a realm for men. Although the story takes place in the decade of the 1920s,

in which gender politics and ideas of femininity and womanhood were similar to those studied in the analysis of Disney's production, the gender codification found in Berger's work is closer to our contemporary canon. Today, we identify gender as a continuum and not as a binary opposition; spaces of possibility are offered to engage femininity and masculinity in different ways; women occupy spaces that have traditionally been occupied by men and vice versa; heteronormativity has been called into question; and feminism, queer theory, and other activist forms of identity politics have dramatically changed cultural and social norms and pervaded academia. A. O. Scott, chief film critic of *The New York Times*, has noted that gender politics are updated in Berger's transformation of the fairytale, where "Blancanieves (as the dwarfs call Carmencita) is not only a passive princess or a helpful housekeeper but also a matador, like her dad. And the misogyny that makes Encarna such a monstrous and memorable figure is balanced by the addition of another, male nemesis for her stepdaughter." Unlike the passive Disney's Snow White, Berger's Snow White becomes an active subject: she is empowered with agency and takes control of her own life. The gender update of the Spanish version also includes the absence of the prince in the film, which constitutes another remarkable choice of the director. The heroine stands by herself, with the company of the six dwarfs. In Berger's version, the heroine's role is not mediated by masculinity, and she does not depend on a male savior at the end of the story.

In the Grimm Brothers' version of Snow White, as well as in the Disney adaptation, the story concludes with a happy ending in which "the innocent, persecuted heroine par excellence . . . succeeds in living happily ever after despite the plots designed by her wicked stepmother" (Tatar, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* 240). This is not the case of Carmen. She eats the poisonous apple and ends up in a state of coma. She becomes a freakshow attraction, exploited by the manipulative manager that had promised Snow White a brilliant career as a bullfighter. The bitter ending also disrupts the tradition of the tale, incorporating a more realistic approach and opening the conversation about the new gender codification. Paradoxically, the destiny of this new brave Spanish Snow White, filled with agency and deprived from the prince savior, is tragic and despairing.

Conclusion

Under the sweet, kind and innocent character of Snow White in Disney's adaptation (1937), we can locate subtle narratives that mirror hegemonic ideals for women in the decade of the thirties: passive, helpful housekeepers and cooks, linked to the Christian tradition and the romantic aspiration of heterosexual love and marriage. Following the gender codification we find in the Disney film, womanhood is linked to beauty, white femininity, and motherhood. The version by Pablo Berger (2012) challenges these traditional gender conceptions and femininity ideals. Without rejecting the kindness and naivety that characterizes Snow White, the director provides her with the strength and the agency needed to succeed in the world of bullfighting, updating gender conceptions, translating the language of Snow White into a Spanish context, and adapting to the preferences of contemporary cinema audiences. In the words of Leavy, "by investigating culture in general, and popular culture more specifically, dominant narratives, images, ideas and stereotyped representations can be exposed and challenged" (224). Studying how gender normativities pervade the film industry and the texts that it produces is essential if we are to understand how these assumptions are codified, how they represent a hegemonic system of ideas, and how they affect the understanding that different societies in different times have in terms of womanhood and femininity.

Notes

[1]For an extensive list of films regarding the character of Snow White, please check the database available at Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB).

[2]Adam Stanley discusses in his dissertation how interwar constructions of gender in the 1920s and 1930s in France and Germany located women in a modernized household. In advertising and publicity materials, he says, "women were assured that a life devoted to home and hearth would not be an unmitigated return to the realm of old-fashioned tradition, but thanks to new modem consumer goods, would instead an empowering lifestyle based on the wonders and benefits of modem technology." Women's roles were defined as wives and

mothers, such as caring for children and maintaining a healthy household (Stanley iv).

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Negotiating and Reconstructing Cultures and Identities: South-Asian Diasporic Narratives in Contemporary Britain

By Tahseen Alam Choudhury

South-Asian diasporic cultures and identities in contemporary Britain are going through a radical metamorphosis owing to the relentless interactions, fusions, and transactions of their cultural values and ideas with their host culture. The impact of the majority culture has become so immanent that the historical binary of identities and cultures between the host and the migrant has begun to fade in the present socio-cultural landscape of Britain. In the context of transnational and transcultural proliferations in Britain, South Asians have reached a stage that signifies them as culturally complex and subversive. The understanding of South Asians in Britain as migrant minorities, or postcolonial other, is interpolated by their post-diasporic positioning, which not only celebrates the influence of *Britishness* but also confronts their diasporic sensibilities by redefining their relationship with *home*. This causes a cultural ambivalence in South-Asian communities in Britain. Migrants from South-Asian Muslim ancestry are also not outside this landscape of cultural shift. They not only celebrate the influences and impact of dominant cultures—namely, British culture—on their formative process, but also complicate the idea of both *Britishness* and *home* by challenging the traditional values of races and cultures. This paper discusses the cultural negotiations and transformations in the literary works of some prominent diasporic writers in Britain with South-Asian origins.

To begin with, it is essential to focus the context of cultural negotiations in Britain prior to discussing the textual examples. The emergence of transnational culture in Britain has, in fact, a two-fold ground. Firstly, the route of diasporization in Britain has a pertinent connection with the massive displacement of races from across the world. Alongside the trading of slaves from Africa, Britain also experienced the influx of South Asians who arrived in England as slaves or even as mistresses and wives

to Englishmen during the time of British Imperialism in the sixteenth century.[1] Caroline Adams, in her *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers*, provides the history of South Asians and their arrival in Britain. She tells of the seamen and ship workers from the Bengal who absconded from anchored ships at the docks of London, Cardiff, and Tilbury to escape the hardship of sea life and to have a better life in Britain. There was no strict legislation regarding the immigration of these migrants to Britain. Adams writes:

> For those on the ships, whether before or during the war, the trips ashore when the ship docked at Liverpool, Cardiff or Tilbury, had a special flavour. Calcutta, the port from which they had come, was the Second City of the Empire and London was the first. They were the subjects of the British king, and London was their capital, as much as his. (39)

Political unrest, natural disasters, and socio-economic underdevelopment in some South-Asian colonized regions of Britain are all effectively causes behind the influx of displaced masses from all over South Asia to England. These migrant communities built their second home in Britain, brought their families, and, subsequently, bred a new generation who experienced the massive impact of multicultural negotiations. This eventually establishes the epistemology of transnationalism, leading the South-Asian minorities in Britain to multiethnic or multicultural interaction; secondly, the analysis of the displacement of migrant cultures entails a discourse of transferral in the form of translation to deconstruct the significance of native context into the non-native (English) one. However, the translational phase of culture undergoes the challenge of indeterminate and ambivalent signification as, in the words of Homi Bhabha, "[t]he transnational dimension of cultural transformation—migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation—makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification" (172). The concept of culture becomes both translatable and transferable with the advent of multicultural proliferation of the decentered English metropolis where the convergence of ethnic minorities/diasporas redefines and reconstructs their identities beyond the margin of racial and

national homogeneity. The essence of heterogeneity here involves the cultural and identity difference in a more engaging way to reveal the notion of transnational liminality that articulates an intra-contestation or gradual transformation of the migrant culture confronting the hegemony of "Englishness" and the purity of *home*. At this point of diasporic ambivalence, a discourse of transposition is predicated with reference to the formation of narratives that are translating and deconstructing both the host and the home cultures and thus structuring the transnational identities. South-Asian authors in Britain, such as Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, and Monica Ali, narrativize these new identities of diasporas, their cultural indeterminacy and diasporic traumas, their inevitable shift from the margin to the center, and their sense of belongingness to the center in their respective works of fiction.

These identities are featured as hybrid, fragmented, polyvalent, deterritorialized, rhetorically pungent, subversive, and complex due to their being at a transitional point between belongingness and otherness. Such signification of South-Asian identity in Britain has emerged out of the juxtaposition of two disparate perspectives. While facing the trauma of alienation from "home" in face of the racial dichotomy of their colonial host (such as Britain), the diasporas are caught between the double sensibilities of loss and rebirth; this is why migration, as Susheila Nasta posits, "is a punishment as well as a freedom, and the airy 'empires' and liminal spaces of the im/migrant imaginary are open as much to demonization as celebration" (157). Being aware of the constrictions of exile in a metropolis such as London, having an imaginary bond with the lost "home," and, finally, experiencing the ambience of existential reform, South-Asian diasporas in England transcribe migration, its aftermaths, and apocalyptic prospects. With the emergence of second-generation South Asians born and raised in Britain, the formative transnational connections of South Asians are being explored within a framework of translation. Rushdie puts this point clearly when he writes, "Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can be gained" (17). What is "gained" here is the new label of "British-Asian" identity that overlaps the traditional concept of national identity and the postcolonial

other; the form of South-Asian culture is also being both deterritorialized and localized in the contemporary socio-cultural scenario in Britain at the same time. So the quest for roots or the representation of the unblemished home culture and values—recurrently evident in works of early South-Asian diaspora in Britain—have been remarkably sidelined in the contemporary South-Asian diasporic narratives, giving no clear impression of fixity of these writers' culture and identity.

The works of early South-Asian diasporic authors in Britain mainly identify their national culture for a readership from a different geographical and cultural landscape. These writers successfully transformed their prose into a representation of *home*. Authors such as Mulk Raj Anand, Nirad Chaudhuri, and Kamala Markandaya, who arrived in London with a passion to be writers, have very conveniently been placed in the position of cultural ambassadors of their *home*. Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951), and Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* (1963) are among some of the prominent early South-Asian diasporic writings in English representing *home* to the West, more specifically, to the British reader. On the other hand, contemporary South-Asian narratives in Britain are mainly grounded on the transformation of diasporic perspectives, cultural temporalities, multicultural pluralities, and the indeterminism of identity. Salman Rushdie addresses the "intractable conflict" lying "at the heart of diasporic imaginary" (154) in *The Satanic Verses,* which inversely outlines his uncomfortable zone as a South-Asian writer in England. Hanif Kureishi, on the other hand, embraces the wave of postcolonial and postmodern hybridity, celebrating the cultural pluralities even in face of the institutional continuum of English racism in *A Buddha of Suburbia.* Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* narrativizes the tension of identity politics that negotiates a space for assimilation of the oriental with the occidental. Another British-Asian author with Bangladeshi origin, Monica Ali, challenges the metaphysics of traditional identity and the cultural purity demystifying the transnational potential of migrancy in exploding the conservative stereotypes. Ali's expansive shift to the point of new identity construction repudiates the discourse of ghettoization and cultural fetishization in repositioning the postcolonial gender even from within. All of these texts still have a point in common—that is,

they articulate the postcolonial resistance within a framework of counterbalance instead of antagonistic opposition between the center and the margin. This means to say that an intra-cultural transaction of values and practices between the metropolis and its colonial margin has been necessitated and aestheticized in the fictional narratives of the South Asian in Britain.

Diasporic writings by South-Asian authors in England have been revolutionized by the path-breaking narrative technique of Rushdie, who, for the first time, fictionalizes the diasporic experiences into the frame of phantasmagoria, impregnating his narrative with the metaphor of migrancy as a global predicament, as well as a form of identity chase. Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (first published in 1988) deals with the serious issue of migration through a magical visualization of diasporic predicaments. He constructs a narrative of migrant sensibility that shuttles between the real and the unreal owing to their complex positioning in the context of the host culture. The two major characters of the novel, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha from India, rewrite their hyphenated subjectivity from a split perspective that is divorced from its historic currency on one hand but empowered with the potency of schizophrenic subversiveness on the other. Their acts of redefinition demonize their present with a dynamic tension of dissolving the old self into the fragments of a new identity, designating the South-Asian diasporic minorities in Britain as the transnational hybrid. If we examine the narrative of the novel from a cultural point of view, leaving aside the well known "blasphemy" accusations it was subjected to, we find Rushdie visualizing London "grotesquely renamed *Ellowen Deeowen* in the migrant mimicry: it is to the city that migrants, the minorities, the diasporic come to change the history of the nation" (Bhabha 169). So the mutation of alterity from the stage of avenging subaltern to the status quo of transnational hybrid becomes clearly discernable in Rushdie's narrative.

The Satanic Verses, however, goes beyond the understanding as a diasporic text in the sense that it problematizes its location as a mere diasporic text as it not only subverts the style of narration but also connects and contrasts national and diasporic experiences. The protagonists Gibreel and Saladin Chamcha, who have fallen victims to racial atrocity, experienced and witnessed the predicaments of immigrants, have

strong penchant for a life in England. During his escape from Rosa Diamond's place by a train to London after the miraculous survival from the air crash, Gibreel feels "the pull of the great city beginning to work its magic on him . . . his talent for embracing renewal for blinding himself to the past hardships so that the future could come into view" (Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, 190). Similarly, after a very disappointed visit to his father, Saladin, on his return to London from Mumbai by the Flight 420 of *Bostan Airline,* feels "with deep relief, the tell-tale shiftings and settlings in his throat which indicated that his voice had begun of its own accord to revert to its reliable, English self" (73). Saladin's return to India at the end of the novel, though, signifies reconciliation with his own identity; nevertheless, Rushdie places Saladin's character in the liminal space of negotiation between South Asianness and Britishness. Saladin, as a voiceover artist for English advertisements, husband of an English woman named Pamela Lovelace, and with his passion for life as a Briton, stands at the transitional point of cultural shift. In addition to this major character of the novel, other characters such as Jumpy Joshi, Mishal Sufiyan, Anahita Sufiyan, and Hanif Johnson clearly exemplify the point of negotiation for relocating the traditional identity to a multilayered space.

Hanif Kureishi, another South-Asian diasporic writer, of Pakistani and English origin, contributes wholeheartedly to the subversion of understandings of South-Asian fictions as representational. While Rushdie paves a way for cultural shifts in these narratives, especially in *The Satanic Verses*, Kureishi radicalizes the idea of cultural transposition with greater intensity by questioning the existence of original values, social and religious constraints, and hegemonic colonial dynamics. Kureishi, expanding the spatiality of Rushdie's narrative, enthusiastically makes his quest for recognizing the position of the second-generation South-Asian immigrants in multicultural England. Kureishi, in fact, reflects the characteristics of cultural transformation taking place in the seventies when the migrants from South Asia and their descendants born in Britain experienced a multidimensional reality. This reality is a reality of diasporization, racial discrimination, cultural ambivalence, and reconstruction.

South-Asian characters in Kureishi's narratives are portrayed with a realistic touch; nevertheless, these characters are multidimensional and un-stereotypical; hence they do not create any unified and homogeneous socio-cultural identity as typically prevalent in realist narratives. For example, the important characters of *The Buddha of Suburbia* proactively deviate from their original identity, confront their own national characteristics, and react to any scheme that attempts to disintegrate them from Britishness. They have crossed the border of national culture and engaged themselves with the practices of British culture becoming completely hybrid in essence. They are, thus, not only the new characters of South-Asian fiction but also a new aspect to be found in contemporary British literature. Be it his *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985), *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), or *The Black Album* (1995), Kureishi's narratives address the growing concerns of the diasporic youth in England as they experience a complex ambivalence of identity politics in the context of the English racism and the emergent multicultural society. Feroza Jussawalla characterizes Kureishi's narratives in the following way:

> All of Kureishi's works track the experiences of young adolescents struggling with their ethnic, sexual, and political identity. It appears that this aesthetic form—a way of shaping the text—is most congenial for Kureishi as he asks the questions: "What is this world that these young people are growing up in and *who* are they exactly?" (58)

Most of the characters of Kureishi's novels are characterized by this indeterminacy of identity and belongingness. They encounter the marginalization and the hegemony of Englishness which, on the contrary, is adopted by them as a part of their natural upbringing. Nevertheless, they are, somehow, tied to their families and homes and thus become a fragmented model of human condition translated and retranslated by the perspectives of two different cultures. This can be identified as the principal ground for Kureishi's narratives to be an explosive mixture of politics, cultural discrepancies, eroticism, and anti-fundamentalism. Kureishi disapproves the idealization of culture and identity in favor of the celebration of

their hybrid form and association. He even takes recourse to the issue of sex as an obliterating point of racial binary.

Both *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album* are set in societies that lose their center as ideally national: Karim in *The Buddha of Suburbia* wanders from home to home, leads a life like an adolescent of a typical British suburb, disintegrates himself from the purity of South Asianness; while, on the other hand, Shahid in *The Black Album* travels back and forth between Western liberal DeeDee Osgood and his cohort of radicalizing Islamists at a London college, forming an impression of decentralized identity of a South Asian in Britain. Homosexuality between his Pakistani protagonists and their English mates in *My Beautiful Launderette* and *The Buddha of Suburbia* strongly destabilizes the prospect and the possibility of defining diaspora in terms of other race, color, and gender. It is in the works of Kureishi that the rendition of transnational liminality is effectively explored to undermine the so-called oppositions between the center and the margin.

The Buddha of Suburbia is undoubtedly a post-diasporic text with a significant essence of postmodernism as it encompasses a wide range of postmodern concerns, such as cultural contingency, fragmentary identity, multicultural interaction, subjective viewpoint, postmodern rootlessness, and complex self-reflexivity; however, the text gives a new and unprecedented dimension to all of these elements and thereby transcends commonplace postmodern characteristics. Kureishi explores these issues by staging a confrontation between his diasporic self and the cosmopolitan existence with which his protagonist, Karim, comes to terms in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Cultural ambivalence is semiotically specified as intrinsic to postmodernity while it is politically signified in postcolonial discourse. The characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia* are derived from the intersection of these two discourses. Karim, Haroon (Karim's father), Jamila, and Anwar (Jamila's father) depart from any cultural specificity, especially from national ones (Indian or English). They forge a new type of Englishness that includes Indianness to a greater or lesser degree, differing not only in the specificities of what they wish to carry over but also in how political they see their choices to be.

Kureshi's novel *The Black Album* shows the fragmentation and hybridity of postmodern British society in a very different

way in its central narrative. Shahid, a student in London, is attracted primarily by two lifestyles: a liberal academic life personified by DeeDee Osgood and a radical Islamist life personified by his housemate Riaz. The educational setting again evokes echoes that Kureishi is cognizant of the critical reading of his works. Shahid eventually comes to a very postmodern, yet also mainstream, conclusion: that both points of view are equally absurd in that neither delivers on its promise of certainty and stability. Even in a moment of calm, after having sex with DeeDee, Shahid is presented with an alternative worldview that has just as much authenticity in Shahid's world as DeeDee's:

> He couldn't help thinking of something Riaz had said a couple of days ago. In passing, Hat had stated that homosexuals should be beheaded, though first they should be offered the option of marriage. Riaz had become interested and said that God would burn homosexuals forever in hell, scorching their flesh in a furnace before replacing their skin as new, and repeating this throughout eternity. He said, "If you've ever burnt yourself on the stove you'll know what I mean. Think of that a million times over."
>
> Riaz's hatred had been so cool, so certain. Shahid had wanted to mention it to DeeDee but was nervous it might distract her. Was Riaz not, though, his friend? If only Shahid could understand where such ideas come from. (Kureishi, *The Black Album*, 119)

Shahid is, in some senses, the straight man, reacting to DeeDee and Riaz just as any Briton would, yet his ethnic identity gives him a special admission into both types of lives: not just access to observe them closely, but context to seriously consider their protests and ideas as not only inevitably part of the noise of society, but possibly of value to society.

In this league of British-Asian writers, we have two more names to add for their aesthetic contributions to the reconfiguration of diasporic identity of South-Asian diaspora in Britain. They are Meera Syal and Monica Ali. Meera Syal's fascinating narrative in *Anita and Me* (1996) portrays the struggle of Meena, a nine-year-old Punjabi girl, to make friends with neighborhood English children in order to minimize her

otherness as an outsider, marked as she is by her exotic background of Punjabi culture. Meena covets blonde hair, a local accent, and, essentially, to be Anita. For Meena, the freedom she really wants is achieved not through her outward changes but through growing up. She knows, even as she is following Anita into trouble, that her practice of living in a world she knows has no single center will serve her better in the long term than Anita's influence. The purity of culture and fixity of identity loses worth here. Meena's bonding with Anita—an English girl who is older than she is and for whom she tells lies—refers to, what Nasta says, the "strategies for survival to make up stories, even tell 'lies' as a means of creating a differently mirrored space . . ." (118). This space is negotiating a link between Meena's exotic past and her diasporic present. Within this space of negotiation, Meena realizes the necessity of contesting the influence of Anita while substantiating the "need to turn to the mythology to feel complete, to belong" (Syal 10).

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, on the other hand, does not depict all of society's fragments, but rather depicts one often hidden fragment. Such fragmentation is caused by negotiation between the host and the Bangladeshi national culture. The juxtaposition of Nazneen's South-Asian self (Bangladeshi) and her reconstructed identity as British offers the reader an understanding of her fragmented identity. But the conflict and contradiction between these two identities eventually makes this process of fragmentation so explicit and vivid that readers can recognize in Nazneen's world a clear vision of a process of cultural negotiation affecting the British society more widely. While highlighting the impact of cultural negotiation, the narrative demonstrates the "theme of female emancipation" in a way to celebrate the identity reform in a multicultural society. The narrative focuses the gender repression both at national and diasporic social systems of Bangladeshi communities. Repositioning of womanhood in a male-dominant culture in order to proclaim and ensure women's rights and liberty and sexual freedom are some major concerns that have been considered in Western literature since the formation of the feminist movement. But Ali has broadened the circumference of this dimension from the West to the East. The emergence of emancipatory consciousness in Nazneen reconfigures her life, liberating her from a familiar but a despotic social circle. Sex

outside marriage is looked upon as a sin in South-Asian communities, especially in a Bangladeshi social system that comprises a strongly conservative and religious outlook. Women's rights and their independence are still experiencing repressive encounters in the name of religion and social practices. What Ali has done is to restructure the same urge for rights and freedom in the light of Western philosophy of female emancipation that eventually challenges cultural purity and the hegemony of identity in a multicultural country such as Britain. The ending line of the novel, "This is England, ... You can do whatever you like" makes us aware of this trajectory of freedom (Ali 492). A new territory of self-analysis and self-recognition is introduced to the South-Asian diasporic landscape in Britain. Regarding this issue of self-recognition, Ruth Maxey posits, "The theme of female emancipation through a growth in sexual consciousness is still relevant, especially in patriarchal societies, and it potentially gains a fresh perspective from being situated within a South Asian immigrant context" (224). Nazneen's loss of faith in identity and culture and her reawakening with full awareness of self are once again appropriating the route of cultural hybridity and transnational identity. Ali problematizes the point of representation by imagining the migrants in *Brick Lane* in a process of cultural shift. "South Asian" is no longer a label with no internal contradictions, and Ali clearly wants to explore this stage of cultural indeterminacy in *Brick Lane*.

South-Asian writers in contemporary Britain must still struggle with assumptions that they are too Asian or not Asian enough. Niven Govinden and Gautam Malkani, however, have taken the post-ethnic framework that Kureishi adopts in *The Black Album* a step further in their explorations of masculinity amongst South-Asian British youth in *Graffiti My Soul* (2007) and *Londonstani* (2007) respectively. Govinden's protagonist is half Tamilian, but his other half is Jewish, so his character is particularly appropriate for transnational identity and Veerapen, as he is called, knows this. He knows when to insert the racial joke into the conversation to make people nervous. Malkani's protagonist, Jas, performs his identity with such zeal, using typically in-group words like "desi" to refer to South Asians and thinking about the implications of celebrating "rakhi" that, when it becomes clear that he is actually not South Asian at all, the reader is the butt of the joke just like Veerapen's interlocutors

(175). Veerapen and Jas are aggressive, obsessed with masculine physicality, and possessive of their own turf and their relationships. Here Jas tries to explain his values to his father:

> It's Dad who breaks the silence by askin me one more to explain the VAT fraud Sanjay'd got going on. What the fuck? Are you thinkin bout copyin it an addin it to all the other dodgy tax dodges that you call business? Maybe you should go work with Ravi's old man. This is serious shit, Dad. This is how I know that Sanjay's actually a big time G an not just some other desi kid tryin to act like a G. Dad looks at me like he can't understand what I'm sayin an so I explain that a G is a gangsta, a badass, a bad apple, Dad, a fuckin bad apple. He gets up, massages his forehead, opens the curtains and leaves. (336)

Londonstani is told in Jas's vernacular. Veerapen's vernacular, too, is significant to our understanding of the character. By the end of the story, lines such as "Punking #2 was another Friday night special" (Govinden 191) make sense. These stories are updated versions of Kulwant's story, and things have changed. Veerapen and Jas's South-Asian identities are not only different from their parents', but they have very little to do with how their parents see being South-Asian.

The critical reception of South-Asian diasporic fictions in Britain provides a scope for debate as they transcend the notion of representation for demonstrating their potentiality to envision the perplexed contemporaneity in them. The rhetoric of South-Asian English novels revolutionizes the concept of readership as they are as much embraced by non-Asian readers as rejected and criticized by the readers from their own circle. This is because the typicality of South-Asian national perspective often interprets the transnational identity or intra-cultural networks with a non-secular and strongly progressive annotation. This is why Rushdie is haunted by the Muslim fundamentalists, Kureishi is distanced by friends and family, and Ali is disowned by her own community. But this can hardly affect their journey, which is now even going beyond this borderline of transnational identity and multiculturalism to deterritorialize the South-Asian diasporas from Britain to across

the world because, in today's world, as Kureishi says, "We're all mixed-race now" (qtd. in Kid). The South-Asian writers born and raised in Britain, such as Hanif Kureishi, Meera Syal, Monica Ali, and Nadeem Aslam, have successfully grappled with this issue of cultural hybridity, defining themselves as British-Asian rather than South-Asian migrants. They have drawn on and extended the legacy of their ancestors, to express what Vijay Mishra terms "the social imaginary of the larger nation" in the production of a "new diaspora" whose works represent not only native cultures of origin but also diasporic culture focused on "questions of justice, self-empowerment, representation, equal opportunity, and definition of citizenry" (236).

Note

[1] Gulam Murshid has recorded the history of Bengalis in his book *Kalapanir Hatchhani: Bilete Bangalir Ithihas* (*The Call of Sea: History of Bengalis in Britain*) written in Bangla and published in Dhaka by Abosar in February 2008. He has described several stages of migration of Bangla-spoken people from the then-Indian subcontinent. According to Murshid English rulers' bringing of slaves, mistresses, and wives from Indian colonies to Britain was one form of migration for South Asians. Murshid also writes about Bengali ship workers who settled in Britain as economic migrants and who struggled through financial hardship and who were caught between two cultures. According to a recent census report, about 3.75 million South Asians, who form 5% of the total population, are residing in Britain.

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