

**REWORKING LOCAL MATERIALS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY  
ANGLOPHONE POSTCOLONIAL POETRY**

by

**Thuraya Altowairqi**

A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of  
**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

Department of English Literature

College of Arts and Law

University of Birmingham

March 2024



## Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which twentieth-century postcolonial poets rework local materials such as renewal myths, cosmological worldviews, spiritual belief systems, and literary traditions. It investigates how poets adapt these materials to challenge colonial discourses, redefine cultural heritage, and negotiate their position in a modern, globalising world. Taking a case study approach, I analyse the nature of the poets' inclusion of local materials and its significance in three collections: Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* (1976), Seamus Heaney's *North* (1975) and Christopher Okigbo's *Heavensgate* (1962). I argue that reworkings do not diminish the cultural specificity of the local. Instead, they generate new local materials – ones in which the local bears the imprint of engagement with contemporary, modern, and global contexts. By taking this approach to the local, this thesis offers to postcolonial poetry studies a more careful and attuned reading practice than the hybridity model which tends to misread or efface the agency of the local in its relationship to the colonial when countering reductive nativist interpretations, which, in their turn, confine the poets' evocation of the local to a mere revival of a precolonial past.

## **Acknowledgments**

I thank my supervisors, Dr Asha Rogers and Dr Andrew Hodgson, for investing their time and effort in meetings and emails to offer guidance and feedback. Their support and input have helped me think more critically, write more purposefully, become more confident in my abilities, adaptable in every sense, and very attentive to details. I would also like to express my gratitude to Taif University for providing me with the opportunity to study at Birmingham University and for funding this research.

This thesis is dedicated to my mom, Jawaher, and dad, Mohammed, for their boundless support and belief in me, and to all those who have supported and inspired me along the way. A special thank you to Raed, my husband, who has been a constant source of strength and motivation, and to Jumana, my beloved daughter, whose unconditional love and countless video calls have kept me grounded and focused. To my colleagues and fellow researchers, especially the familiar faces at Westmere House, your insightful and encouraging words have truly made a difference in my research experience.

## Contents

Introduction .....	1
Beyond cut and paste: ‘reworking’ as a poetic practice .....	11
Perspectives on ‘reworking the local’ in Anglophone postcolonial poetry .....	14
Constraints of nativist perspectives.....	17
The ‘local’ in postcolonial poetry criticism .....	27
Contextualising ‘the local’ in postcolonialism .....	34
Methodology.....	39
Challenges and limits in addressing local specificity.....	39
A close reading perspective.....	41
Selection of poets.....	46
Chapter One: Arun Kolatkar: Bhakti Poetics in Post-independence India.....	50
Cultural extremism in newly independent India.....	59
Brahmanism from Vedic culture to Hindu nationalism .....	59
Bhakti movement: response to brahmanism and relevance in modern India.....	66
Kolatkar: a bhakti voice in post-independence India.....	73
Kolatkar’s approach to tradition.....	73
Bhakti resonance in <i>Jejuri</i> .....	81
Critical reception: <i>Jejuri</i> ’s artistic success and religious failure .....	87
Kolatkar’s shifting narrative voice, structure, and beguiling simplicity.....	94
En route to Jejuri: a departure from the mainstream Hindu religiosity.....	95
Inside Jejuri: beyond the temple: towards spiritual independence .....	100
Exiting Jejuri: transience versus rigidity .....	124
Conclusion .....	128
Chapter Two: Seamus Heaney: A Northen Locality at The Troubles.....	131
Northern Ireland, a British colony in the North of Europe? .....	142

Heaney's two-mindedness and political torpidity.....	153
Poetry in times of politics.....	157
The emblematic bog.....	163
Critical reception: insufficiencies of Heaney's symbolism .....	169
Heaney's chronological flux and layered referentiality.....	174
A self-aware sinner: empathy, silence, and voyeurism.....	174
A moral maze: can violence ever be art? .....	192
Conclusion .....	203
Chapter Three: Christopher Okigbo: From Ancestral Beliefs to Modern African	
Consciousness.....	208
Missionary disruption of Igbo cosmic harmony .....	219
Igbo cosmology: duality and adaptability .....	219
The missionary presence in Igboland.....	224
Okigbo's synthesis of ancestral and Christian elements.....	227
The sources of Okigbo's postcoloniality.....	227
Okigbo's postcolonial response as 'personal religion' .....	230
Critical response: interpreting <i>Heavensgate</i> 's return to Idoto .....	239
Okigbo's journey beyond the heaven's gate.....	246
Invocation: initiating the journey .....	246
Threshold: crossing boundaries.....	254
Rebirth: regaining cosmic harmony .....	265
Conclusion .....	270
Conclusion .....	272
Bibliography .....	282

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1 ‘Woman of rank with Roman wine-ladle, gloss goblet and ornaments’ (Glob 139) .....	175
Figure 2 ‘Stakes and branches that pinned ‘Queen Gunhild’ in the bog’ (Glob 75).....	180
Figure 3 ‘The young girl from the Windeby bog’ (Glob 111) .....	185
Figure 4 ‘The Windeby girl and the band with which she was blindfolded’ (Glob 115).....	186
Figure 5 ‘The first picture of the Grauballe Man’ Glob (38) .....	194
Figure 6 ‘The decapitated girl from Roum’ (Glob 99).....	200

## Introduction

This thesis focuses on what I call local materials in postcolonial poetry. It, in particular, explores how three twentieth-century Anglophone postcolonial poets, Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004), Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), and Christopher Okigbo (1930-1967), rework local materials for postcolonial purposes that include subverting and transforming colonial discourses, reclaiming and redefining cultural heritage in contemporary contexts, and negotiating the poet's position in a modern, globalising world. The 'local', in my argument, is culturally specific because it denotes a spatial and temporal particularity. It encompasses place in the sense of landscape, geography, and location, as well as the sense of history, tradition, or custom unique to a particular period. There are many traces of 'local materials' in postcolonial poetry: from myths such as those revolving around the renewal brought by the Nordic Mother Goddess, Nerthus, in Iron Age bogs, to epics such as the Sanskrit *Ramayana* and Mesopotamian *Gilgamesh*, along with literary, spiritual, and formal traditions like the Arabic ghazal, the Indian bhakti, or Yoruba oriki oral praise poetry. To this we might add the belief systems embedded in the social and cosmic tenets of the Igbo or the spiritual principles of brahman Hinduism. These local materials, I argue, constitute a wide range of resources for poetic expression with their mythical, cosmological, spiritual, environmental, and quotidian energies, among others. Through their incorporation of local materials into their work, my thesis argues, postcolonial poets access, as well as make available to readers, a web of cultural practices, beliefs, and experiences, which afford innovative and purposeful explorations of identity and belonging.

Local materials, I suggest, are of particular interest to poets that rework cultural heritage and are interested in alternative modes of identity formation, mediating between their rootedness

in a particular place and culture while simultaneously engaging with diverse localities, histories, and artistic styles. For instance, Kolatkar configures a heterodox, pluralistic, and evolving historical, spiritual, and literary genealogy that situates him within the medieval, the modern, India, and the world beyond in *Jejuri* (1976). Meanwhile, Heaney constructs a liminal geographical landscape and dense historical stratum around and on top of the Iron Age bog in *North* (1975) to present, and perhaps probe beyond, the sectarian binaries of the Troubles. Okigbo develops a personalised spiritual framework to suit his transformation from the figure of a Catholic priest to the Igbo mother goddess Idoto to a modernist poet in *Heavensgate* (1962). In this sense, local materials emerge as a source of allegiance, providing a bigger picture, be it political, religious, literary, or a combination of all, to make sense of one's life and history, connecting the past and projecting into the future. With their particularities, they offer poets a strategic vantage point within which they operate, anchoring their worldviews in proximate contexts that are local, regional, or national. Notwithstanding, as Laetitia Zecchini observes, the 'here' of immediate surroundings is never a given or fixed premise but rather a pivot 'to connect and defamiliarize with a multiplicity of other places, other temporalities, other literatures, and occasionally other languages'.<sup>1</sup> Building on this, I argue that the local is valuable to poets precisely because it possesses a remarkable degree of dynamism, porosity, and adaptability. These characteristics enable it to assume composite and multilayered entity that evolves beyond geographical limitations and the confines of culture and history. Consider, for example, the Islamic geography and history from which the Persian variant of the Arabic ghazal emerged and found expression in English language poetry

---

<sup>1</sup> Francesca Orsini and Laetitia Zecchini, 'The Locations of (World) Literature: Perspectives from Africa and South Asia: Introduction', *Journal of World Literature* 4:1 (2019), 1-12, (p. 10), doi:10.1163/24056480-00401003. See also: Laetitia Zecchini, 'Practices, Constructions and Deconstructions of 'World Literature' and 'Indian Literature' from the PEN All-India Centre to Arvind Krishna Mehrotra', *Journal of World Literature* 4:1 (2019), 82-106, doi:10.1163/24056480-00401005.

through the works of poets like Agha Shahid Ali. Another instance is the various pan-Indian traditions through which the *Ramayana* travelled, appearing in countless popular and regional adaptations across various languages and dialects. In these examples, as illuminated by Zecchini, literature becomes a ‘space’ rather than ‘inheritance’ where ‘the world of these poets is a world-as-bricolage and a world-as-assemblage that is inseparable from the practice of reading and writing as poaching, by which the world and one’s place in it are being constantly remade’.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, ‘East’ and ‘West’ cease to exist ‘as prior, stable constructs but are constantly reallocated’.<sup>3</sup> Still, even as they participate in a ‘world-as-bricolage’ at the level of world literary exchange, local materials remain grounded in culturally-specific interactions and histories that ensure their distinctiveness and recognisability to an identifiable locale and temporality. It is within this paradox of the worldly and the local that I see poets demonstrate their adeptness in reworking local materials, illuminating their agency in anticipating, converging with, or diverging from so-called foreign influences, thereby becoming fluid and multiple, yet acutely rooted and singular.

In considering the appropriate terminology to describe the local spiritual, mythical, and cosmological worldviews evoked by the poets, I will evaluate the terms ‘resources’, ‘materials’, and ‘elements’. Initially, ‘resources’ appears promising because it suggests a reservoir of cultural knowledge from which postcolonial poets can draw. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘resources’ are ‘stocks or reserves of money, materials, people, or some other asset, which can be drawn on when necessary’; they are ‘means of supplying a deficiency or need; something that is a source of help, information, strength’.<sup>4</sup> In the editorial

---

<sup>2</sup> Orsini and Zecchini, ‘The Locations of (World) Literature’, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Resource, N.’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, June 2024) doi.org/10.1093/OED/1114888220, [accessed 1 October 2024].

for the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* special issue, *Resistant Resources/Resources of Resistance: World-Literature, World-Ecology and Energetic Materialism*, Claire Westall emphasises that resources extend beyond mere “raw” materials that are extracted and “converted” into commodities and energy.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on Jason W. Moore, Westall critiques “substantialist” thinking that reduces resources to ‘material “stuff” that exists independently of events and relations, advocating instead for a “relational” perspective that recognises the significance of resources within the dynamics of capital and social struggles.<sup>6</sup> From this broader perspective, ‘literary and other cultural texts’ are viewed as ‘resources’ in their own right, intertwined with the dynamics of capital, social relations, and struggles for identity in postcolonial contexts.<sup>7</sup> Prominent postcolonial thinkers, as noted by Westall, have examined how texts engage with issues of resource extraction and exploitation: Edward Said draws attention to how canonical works reference wealth derived from colonial exploitation, revealing how imperial culture benefited from the labour and wealth of colonies, while Frantz Fanon critiques postcolonial elites for perpetuating colonial patterns of resource appropriation, emphasising the struggles of newly independent nations with equitable distribution.<sup>8</sup>

However, while the term ‘resources’ effectively conveys something valuable that can be drawn upon or utilised, it often carries a utilitarian or economic connotation, which may not align with the cultural, spiritual, and mythical content highlighted in my thesis. ‘Resources’ seems to frame cultural systems as extractable assets, raising concerns about issues of exploitation and commodification, which are not central to my discussion of how Kolatkar,

---

<sup>5</sup> Claire Westall, ‘World-Literary Resources and Energetic Materialism’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53.3 (2017), 265–276, (p. 271), doi:10.1080/17449855.2017.1337671.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 271-272.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 267-268.

Heaney, and Okigbo reclaim, rework, transform, and negotiate local materials in a modern, globalising world. The term ‘materials’ also has non-spiritual connotations, particularly in the conventional definitions that contrast it with the realm of the spiritual: ‘concerned with worldly things; unspiritual’; ‘relating to the physical as opposed to the intellectual or spiritual aspect of things; concerned with physical needs, bodily comfort, etc.; materialistic’.<sup>9</sup>

However, Jarad Zimbler and Rachel Bower’s argument for a broad definition of the materials of literature that includes both tangible and intangible components is useful here. They explain that the ‘*materials of literature*’ involve much more than what can be perceived ‘visually, aurally, or haptically’; they exist beyond the physical traces of ‘production, circulation, and reception’, such as ‘business correspondence, marketing brochures, newspaper clippings, invoices, and accounts’.<sup>10</sup> While tangible materials include items like manuscripts, letters, archival scraps, and various other physical objects that can be handled, observed, or interacted with through the senses, Zimbler and Bower emphasise that literature’s materials also include ‘the stuff of language and literary culture’ – ‘words and their rules and patterns of arrangement [...] as well as stories, genres, forms, subject-matters, themes, and narrative strategies’, which all contribute to the making of a literary work.<sup>11</sup> Zimbler and Bower make a useful distinction between two stages of literary production to clarify how writers engage with the materials of literature. The first stage is ‘labour’, which encompasses not only the act of writing itself but also the physical and practical tasks involved, such as editing, proofreading, typesetting, and the roles played by external agents like publishers, marketers, and reviewers, among others.<sup>12</sup> The second stage precedes labour

---

<sup>9</sup> ‘Material, Adj., N., & Adv.’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, June 2024) doi:10.1093/OED/1347973062, [accessed 1 October 2024].

<sup>10</sup> Jarad Zimbler and Rachel Bower, ‘On the Making of African Literatures’, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 49.3 (2020), 193–211, (p. 194), doi:10.1093/camqtlby/bfaa020, [accessed 2 October 2024].

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 193-194.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

and involves working with ‘(sounds, words, rhythms, syntax, forms, genres, media, subjects, stories)’.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, according to Zimbler and Bower, writers do not create the materials they work with from scratch; rather, these materials ‘have particular heft and hold, pressure and pull, arising from the manner in which it has been put to work at other times and in other places’.<sup>14</sup> I position my thesis within this conceptual framework of ‘materials’, as it suggests malleability and adaptability that enable poets to manipulate, rework, and transform local materials to create new meanings and perspectives.

Like ‘materials’, the term ‘elements’ evokes dynamism and reconfigurability. Elements are always in motion, interacting and adapting to generate new forms. As Jeffrey Cohen and Lowell Duckert observe in their introduction to *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (2015), ‘[e]lemental matter is inherently creative, motile, experimental, impure because fire, water, air, and earth are never inert’.<sup>15</sup> Elements, Cohen further emphasises, ‘are as restless as the human imagination’.<sup>16</sup> They continually merge and reconfigure to form new creations ‘and in that process disclose surprising worlds, challenging narratives, the tangling of nature’s chain’.<sup>17</sup> *Elemental Ecocriticism* ‘seeks in imaginative and critical texts a lush archive for thinking ecology anew’, emphasising the importance of resisting the reduction of the natural world to ‘commodity’ in support of ecological activism.<sup>18</sup> This approach is contextualised through the works of figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Ovid, Boethius, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, who, according to Cohen and Duckert, have demonstrated that elements can serve ‘as a spur to cosmology, environmental

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 196-197.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (eds), *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

awareness, narrative, trope, and art'.<sup>19</sup> In the context of this thesis, the term 'local elements' can register the nature-culture dichotomy. Elements can acquire spiritual or mythical significance through human perception, as evidenced in various cultural and religious traditions. For example, in Igbo cosmology, the river Idoto is not just a natural water body but is revered as a manifestation of mother goddess; alongside a male counterpart, Idoto symbolises harmony, balance, and regeneration. Similarly, in parts of Northern Europe, bogs – a type of inland water – are perceived as sacred groves dedicated to Nerthus, the fertility goddess. In the bhakti tradition, everyday objects like stones and hills are seen as expressions of the divine, illustrating how spiritual meaning is embedded in the physical. My thesis discusses poets' use of local 'elements' in these ways, but does not primarily engage with the broader goal of making nature and culture thinkable together, nor does it take up the call for ecological activism, as seen in the collaborative project of *Elemental Ecocriticism*. Therefore, of the three terms 'resources', 'materials' and 'elements', 'materials' captures the overarching subject matter of my thesis and its primarily cultural and spiritual focus. However, I still use the term 'elements' to emphasise specific constituent parts of the local materials the poets evoke: for example, 'Nerthus' as an element in the bog myth and 'Idoto' in Igbo cosmology. In my thesis, 'element' also signifies in a second sense, referring to those literary techniques and devices such as symbol, motif, or image that resonates in a particular locality. Notable examples of such 'local elements' include Heaney's severed head imagery in 'Strange Fruit' and Kolatkar's bhakti-inspired metaphor of the body as a temple in 'The Bus', both of which I will examine in detail in the subsequent chapters. While Zimbler and Bower's concept of materials encompasses literary aspects like sounds, rhythms, and forms, I distinguish 'elements' as a term that implies a multi-layered quality suitable for addressing the cultural

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

and textual dimensions in my thesis. The two levels to the term ‘local element’ – one referring to cultural context, the other of literary textuality – work together in my analysis, evoking connectedness and difference between geographic location or cultural tradition, and shaping poetic meaning. This twofold meaning follows what Jahan Ramazani describes as ‘poetry’s peculiar ways of articulating the translocalization of locality’, which it does ‘by virtue of its metaphoric reach and formal elasticity, its compression and velocity, deep memory, its inhabiting of multiple spaces and times at once, and its proficiency at straddling discrepant sites, both real and imagined’.<sup>20</sup>

I analyse the nature of the poets’ inclusion of ‘local materials’ and its significance in case studies of three collections: Arun Kolatkar’s *Jejuri*, Seamus Heaney’s *North* and Christopher Okigbo’s *Heavensgate*. Collections often develop a narrative or thematic thread that ties the poems together, inviting readers to trace the cumulative effect of the poet’s stylistic choices and overarching artistic vision; such cumulative effect can be easily overlooked or misread if we examine individual poems in isolation. This is particularly evident in quest poems like those of Okigbo, which can be quickly judged as a nativist return to Idoto if one only considers the initial poem depicting the poet-protagonist’s plea. The spirituality of Kolatkar’s pilgrimage narrative becomes apparent when we do not solely dwell on poems that express scepticism towards ritual-ridden brahman religiosity, realising that the journey leads, in other poems, to the divine in the mundane world of the temple-town Jejuri. Without recognising the unity of Heaney’s poems within the collection, it becomes difficult to fully grasp the purposeful two-mindedness conveyed by his speaker. Indeed, this focus on sequences places more weight on content and structure, which may preclude a deeper engagement with the distinct aesthetic and formal features of poetry. Nevertheless, I remain mindful of the poets’

---

<sup>20</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry in a Global Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 75.

use of imagery, metaphor, symbolism, as well as form, metre, word choice, and tone when these elements illuminate how the local is reworked within the sequences. For example, in my analysis of the third sequence of *Heavensgate*, titled ‘Watermaid’, I emphasise the poem’s position within the threefold structure of rites of passage evoked in the collection. This poem captures the poet-protagonist in a transitional state; it follows his withdrawal from conventional spiritual and artistic practices in the second sequence, ‘Initiations’, and precedes the resolution that occurs in the fourth sequence, ‘Lustra’, where he presents an offering to appease the goddess and, as a result, regains the poetic insight that eluded him in ‘Watermaid’. While I do not delve into the intricacies of Okigbo’s use of irregular rhythm, caesuras, and enjambment – poetic techniques that convey the ephemeral presence of the Watermaid – I highlight Okigbo’s rich imagery. As my close reading will demonstrate, Okigbo’s imagery reveals his reworking of the water goddess Idoto into the figure of the Watermaid, transforming her into a water spirit that embodies his desire to be a poet inspired by her, rather than a priest devoted to her. Ultimately, my goal is to understand how postcolonial poets rework local materials, a task I believe best accomplished by examining the comprehensive poetic architecture rather than isolated moments, while still appreciating the poets’ formal and stylistic choices that contribute to this process.

Each of my case studies is guided by a series of four interrelated research questions that seek to develop an inclusive and pluralistic approach to the range of local materials drawn upon in twentieth century postcolonial poetry. These questions are concerned with the appeal local materials exert for each of the three poets, how they creatively transform them, what cultural, political, spiritual, or artistic purposes these materials are put to, as well as the implications of these reworkings for literary reading practices and reception. To answer these questions involves investigating the factors that influence the poets’ choices, including personal

experiences and cultural backgrounds, analysing the specific literary techniques and devices they employ to evoke local elements, such as metaphor, juxtaposition, and symbolism. It also entails examining how these creative choices reflect, or challenge prevailing cultural norms, convey indirect political messages, negotiate spiritual concepts, experiment with or push against conventional poetic forms and styles, all while considering the extent to which such creative processing moves beyond reductive conceptualisations of the local as national, nativist, or provincial. This enquiry involves addressing the ramifications of reworking local materials for reading practices, both within the politically and socially charged contexts where these poetic texts were produced in the sixties and seventies, and as readings have evolved over time. This includes the interpretations that can emerge as we register today the aesthetic and political effects of the strategic act of reworking undertaken by the poets within their respective web of cultural, political, and aesthetic dynamics.

In selecting my primary texts, I consider sequences of manageable size to facilitate a thorough yet feasible analysis within the scope of the thesis. Beyond this pragmatic consideration, my choice of these three collections is based on their respective engagements with the central debates that this thesis seeks to address, particularly in relation to my intervention between ‘nativist’ and ‘hybridising’ readings of postcolonial poetry that reworks local materials. These debates include the political demands of nativist perspectives over artistic considerations and their discouragement of using the English language to articulate local materials. Additionally, these debates relate to the hybridity model’s focus on how postcolonial poets adopt and adapt colonial forms, languages, and modes of expression, which can leave local influences underexplored or underrepresented. In the sections that follow, particularly in ‘Perspectives on ‘reworking the local’ in Anglophone postcolonial poetry’ and ‘Contextualising ‘the local’ in postcolonialism’, I will elaborate on these debates and provide examples of how *Jejuri*,

*North*, and *Heavensgate* engage with them, each in its distinct ways. I will further develop this discussion within the main chapters as well.

### **Beyond cut and paste: ‘reworking’ as a poetic practice**

Postcolonial poets use their unique positionality, shaped by their personal identifications, religious and educational background as well as wider geo-political conditions and historical contexts, to engage with local materials in their creative works. Central to this is the term ‘reworking’, a creative and intricate process that exceeds the mere ‘cut and paste’ of materials from one context to another. ‘Reworking’ is not collage nor juxtaposition, but a deliberate and careful engagement, wherein the poet incorporates, transforms, adapts, subverts, reimagines, layers or reinterprets local materials of language, myth, history, religion or cosmology to suit contemporary realities, with all their social, political and artistic complexities. Consider the case of *Sarpa Satra* (2004) by Arun Kolatkar, which revitalises and reworks the opening myth of the *Mahabharata*, the snake sacrifice conducted by king Janamejaya. The narrative discloses that Janamejaya’s father met his demise at the fangs of Takshaka, a naga snake seeking revenge for the loss of its family during the incineration of the Khandava forest by Arjuna and Krishna. Seeking revenge, Janamejaya decides to exterminate the entire naga species by conducting a sacrificial ritual involving a pit of fire. This event is ‘an apocalyptic rite, a snake sacrifice – the sacrifice (*yajñya*) being the central notion and rite of Vedic religion’.<sup>21</sup> Kolatkar reworks the Sanskrit epic by situating the tale into a recognisable context

---

<sup>21</sup> Laetitia Zecchini, ‘Dharma Reconsidered: The Inappropriate Poetry of Arun Kolatkar in *Sarpa Satra*’, in *Religion in Literature and Film in South Asia*, ed. Daniela Dimitrova (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 137.

for his readers in the early twenty-first century when the poem was published.<sup>22</sup> He also reworks it by adopting an alternative perspective that highlights characters that are usually peripheral in the epic, like Jaratkaru, a snake woman, and the brahman priest Astika, her half-human son. Kolatkar's incorporation of a contemporary setting and unconventional perspective introduces a new lens through which to view the story. This departure from the original tale, as remarked by readers like Rizio Raj, provides a vantage point to address 'the furious fires of hatred that continues through generations. One act of violence leads to another'.<sup>23</sup> Raj's insight resonates with Kolatkar's Jaratkaru. Although she acknowledges that Takshaka has always been considered an 'extremist' deserving 'the hardest punishment in the book', she recognises that: 'Takshaka has never been quite himself | since his wife died, | cut down brutally | during the senseless massacre that took place' in the Khandava forest.<sup>24</sup> However, this historical episode, Jaratkaru tells her son, has fallen into oblivion: 'In fact, we've been trying to forget it, erase the incident from our memories'.<sup>25</sup>

Kolatkar's deviation from the original narrative thus also gives voice to politically dominated communities that are often overlooked in the grand epic. Zecchini astutely observes that this is one of several instances in which Kolatkar is inspired by the heterodox bhakti and folkloric traditions:

These traditions have always reflected, subverted, and contested the sacred texts. They embody, humanize, and domesticate them, by offering translations that are more personal and contextualized, even organic and physiological. They also serve as

---

<sup>22</sup> This is achieved through references to contemporary terms such as 'secret police', 'an extremist', 'all terrorists', 'the great superhero', and 'fantastic weapons', among others. Arun Kolatkar, *Collected Poems in English*, ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Tarsit: Bloodaxe, 2010), pp.192-197.

<sup>23</sup> Rizio Raj, 'Kala Ghoda Poems Arun Kolatkar: Book review', *Indian Literature* 48:5 (223) (2004): 37-42 (p. 41), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23346471>> [accessed 6 March 2024].

<sup>24</sup> Arun Kolatkar, *Collected Poems in English*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

mediums of self-expression and self-assertion, by which subaltern or minority communities appropriate a story or a voice and create a space for themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Irony emerges as yet another reworking tool in Kolatkar's text, employed to cast a discerning eye upon societal norms and established ideals of heroism, virtue, and religiosity. One example of irony is the portrayal of Krishna and Arjuna as unrighteous and deplorable for misusing their divine power to burn the forest, while in the original *Mahabharata*, they are revered as heroic lords. Kolatkar, furthermore, questions the moral authority of vengeful rulers like Janamejaya, for 'if the person voicing such sentiments | should happen to be | the king of a sizeable country, | it should be cause for concern indeed | for the future of the country in question', said Jaratkaru.<sup>27</sup> This critique extends to the priestly consultants of the king: once the sacrifice comes to an end, 'the officiating priests | honoured guests, vedic wizards' collect surpluses riches in exchange: 'bearing wealth beyond measure cartloads of gold, | herds of cattle with golden horns'.<sup>28</sup> The ritualistic affair concludes while the king contemplates methods to bridge the consequent fiscal gap: 'What new taxes to levy | to refill the coffers'.<sup>29</sup> Kolatkar's juxtaposition of the ancient and the contemporary, unconventional point of view, and use of irony are all markers of reworking. It is these characteristics of reworking which Zecchini also observes in commenting on the blurred boundaries between written and oral traditions, as well as the interplay between the great tradition ('mārga'), associated with Sanskrit and classical texts authorised by a Brahmin orthodoxy, and the 'little tradition ('deśī'), oral, local, plural, and 'carried' by the illiterate'.<sup>30</sup> This dynamic interplay,

---

<sup>26</sup> Zecchini, 'Dharma Reconsidered', p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> Kolatkar, *Collected Poems*, p. 188.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>30</sup> Zecchini, 'Dharma Reconsidered', p. 138.

she rightly observes, creates a dialogue between the past and present, universal and local, shared and distinctive aspects across various communities, regions, and individuals.<sup>31</sup>

Reworking, I propose, differs from similar concepts such as ‘remaking’ and ‘retelling’. While the former may imply the creation of something new from scratch, the latter suggests the simple recounting of the main events, themes, and ideas of the original work or tale, often preserving its core elements. While ‘reworking’ may include a degree of both remaking and retelling, it indicates a more subtle process of adaptation and transformation by which poets can breathe new life into old narratives and offer fresh perspectives on familiar themes. This could mean navigating the different paths that a culturally-specific reference can take and its potential to be reinterpreted to convey different meanings from what is conventionally known. At the same time, the act of reworking can also involve the poets’ imaginative use of diverse styles and influences, including from the colonial era, to juxtapose, reconceive, bridge, and remap disparate geo-cultural spaces and histories. By proposing ‘reworking’ as a term to describe the creative process of postcolonial poets, this thesis sheds light on how they tap into the richness and complexity of local narratives, practices, and traditions, creating something that is both a bridge between the past and present and suffused with other places and times.

### **Perspectives on ‘reworking the local’ in Anglophone postcolonial poetry**

Various approaches exist for interpreting how Anglophone postcolonial poets evoke local materials into their texts through this reworking process that situates these materials within contemporary contexts not insulated from colonial legacies and global encounters. The range of approaches encompasses nativist paradigms that emphasise cultural purity, hybridity

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

models that highlight liminal areas of cultural exchange, as well as world and global literary perspectives that look for mutual enrichments between the local and the colonial and global.<sup>32</sup>

For readers grounded in nativist viewpoints, poetry that draws from local materials should take on a role of revitalising the purity of these materials.<sup>33</sup> This perspective, distinguished by its emphasis on the preservation of traditional cultural materials and the affirmation of essentialist identities, tends to cast a sceptical eye on the colonial and global interactions that poets express when they attempt to put the local in dialogue with external influences.<sup>34</sup> These interactions might not just remain invisible to nativist readers but could also be deemed inadequate in fulfilling the expected narrative, potentially leading to allegations of inauthenticity, detachment from local culture, or susceptibility to colonialism. This sentiment extends even to the language choices made by poets, as the use of English as a poetic medium has been construed by nativist critics as an endeavour to cater to colonial or Western sensibilities. It is pertinent to note here that while the nativist positions addressed in this thesis often fall within the temporal confines of the seventies and eighties, galvanised by post-independence fervour, decolonisation movements, or even conflicts such as the Northern Irish Troubles, these positions remain relevant in the contemporary period, among readers keen to safeguard local roots from global homogeneity. The term ‘nativist reader’ may also indicate

---

<sup>32</sup> This categorisation brings me to the treacherous terrain of institutional arguments surrounding fields and terminology, which I will try to avoid by focusing on the analytical practice in my approach to the poetic texts. This decision is motivated by the understanding that such debates often trigger attempts to justify or undermine rigid institutional constructs, which may hinder thorough explorations of the subject matter at hand (i.e., reworking local materials in poetry). Still, I use ‘local’ as descriptor for Anglophone poetry: local Anglophone poetry, which is by implication *postcolonial*; *postcolonial* is by the same token *world* literature, and *world* literature is with necessity *global*.

<sup>33</sup> The reader referred to throughout this thesis is the scholarly reader, or critic, who reads with an analytical intent.

<sup>34</sup> *The Literary Thing* (2014) by Rosinka Chaudhuri discusses these tendencies in the context of nineteenth-century Bengali literature and rebuffs their fear of losing local authenticities to European modernities, languages, and other forms of influences. She takes a more dynamic approach revisiting the controversial debates surrounding the poets, their works to ‘investigate the place of the aesthetic, the political, and the collective in the making of a modern cultural sphere’, as explained in the publisher’s note. Rosinka Chaudhuri, *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere* (Bern; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014).

the location of the critic in the post-colony, as opposed to the reader based in the metropolis; yet this definition is not generalisable because not all locally-based readers are necessarily nativists. Therefore, within the conceptual parameters of this thesis, the term works more as a code word for various nativist positions that are characterised by cultural, political, and linguistic conservatism and uphold notions of purity, binarism, and essentialism. I will come to specific examples of nativist readings of the three poets under study and present arguments to refute their limitations in the following section.

To understand how a nativist reading might generally unfold let us return to Kolatkar's *Sarpa Satra*, a poem that recontextualises a story from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* in English in a contemporary setting. To recap, the poem highlights the traditionally silenced perspective of a snake woman to dramatize the plight of a minority group; the poem amplifies the woman's voice to also criticise the irrational king, Janamejaya, and his advisors who exploit their priestly role by providing misguided spiritual guidance and engaging in vindictive rituals for monetary gain. Within the purview of a nativist perspective, one would naturally celebrate the poem's homage to sacred narratives and rituals, applauding its resonance with Indian heritage. However, a nativist approach might overlook Kolatkar's literary decision to empower a marginalised character, opting instead to emphasise the poem's alignment with the source narrative it revives. Alternatively, a nativist reading might instrumentalise the subjugated snake community to advance cultural or political agendas. For instance, it could be construed as an allegory for the colonial experience, with the snake woman's tenacity symbolising resistance against imperial oppression. Nonetheless, such an allegorical stance might find it difficult to accept the poem's social critique, which exposes corrupt religious figures and inept leaders who, in the context of post-independence India, represent local elites colluding with colonial powers. Rather than acknowledging the poem's sense of heterodoxy and

inclusivity inspired by the local bhakti tradition, as Zecchini does, such critics may perceive Kolatkar's social critique as tainted by colonial biases and prejudices. A nativist reading might also be dissatisfied with Kolatkar's linguistic departure to use the inherited colonial English to restore a sacred Hindu text. In plain terms, then, a nativist lens, while we should salvage its emphasis on the inception of *Sarpa Satra* from a specific local context, may tend to ignore or oversimplify the textual, social, and linguistic layers of the literary work, which can misunderstand its meaning and impact.

### Constraints of nativist perspectives

Across the subsequent three chapters, a variety of cultural, political, and linguistic conservatism will underscore nativist interpretive positions, inviting critique on two fronts. One notable pitfall of nativist interpretations is their propensity to isolate local materials from other influences, or pit them against each other, thereby reinforcing the same binary constructs that colonialism had imposed, such as 'coloniser' versus 'colonised', and 'traditional' versus 'modern'. This risk is often identified and addressed by proponents of the hybridity model, notably Jahan Ramazani who, building on Fanon, argues that nativist approaches tend to 'replicate in reverse the European values against which they are pitted'.<sup>35</sup> If poetry simplifies or essentialises the local culture it seeks to represent, it could inadvertently perpetuate the colonial practice of stereotyping and simplifying local culture, albeit in an internalised guise – that is by framing the identity of the local people as a fixed and homogeneous category that excludes other identities or by reducing the complexity of local cultures and histories to a singular narrative. My chapter on Seamus Heaney's *North*

---

<sup>35</sup> Jahan Ramazani 'Poetry and Postcolonialism', in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, ed. by Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 940.

demonstrates how nativist interpretations can reduce poetry to binary equations, boiling down his bog poems to either serving as a platform for nationalist glorifications of Ireland and its precolonial history or a perpetuation of colonial-aligned stereotypes of Ireland as mired in atavistic tribal violence. For the first group of readers, Heaney aesthetically elevates contemporary references to sacrificial figures, so they appear as Christ-like symbols sacrificed in the hope of reviving a romanticised Ireland. This interpretation aligns Heaney with Irish nationalism, a stance that can be either celebrated by zealous nationalists, or denounced, as Henry Hart does, criticising Heaney for reifying Irish nationalist fighters with the reverence and self-sacrifice associated with religious symbols.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, nationalist commentators like Desmond Fennell perceive his poems as lacking in the direct political thrust necessary to address the root cause of the conflict – British colonialism.<sup>37</sup> Both perspectives, I argue, are typical of the issues that characterise these critical binaries more generally. In the case of Heaney's *North* they fail to acknowledge that the speaker displays several kinds of attitudes towards the complexities of sectarian afflictions: he is ambivalent, two-minded, and sometimes indeterminate or conflicted. Such varying attitudes complicate attempts to pigeonhole the poems into binary distinctions like Catholic/Protestant and nationalist/unionist because, as we will see in the detailed examination of Heaney's textual reworkings, the bog symbol emerges as a liminal space where various, non-exclusively Irish geographies and historical periods intersect, conveying several and undetermined perspectives.

---

<sup>36</sup> Henry Hart, 'History, Myth, and Apocalypse in Seamus Heaney's *North*', *Contemporary Literature* 30.3 (1989), 387-411 (p.404), doi:10.2307/120841.

<sup>37</sup> Desmond Fennell, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No 1* (Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991), pp.16-17.

The second constraint of nativist readings is their tendency to downplay the literary value of postcolonial poetry. This thesis seeks both to emphasise the literary craft manifesting through textual reworkings and to suggest that these techniques serve postcolonial purposes, albeit ones that transcend the narrow focus on cultural restoration and direct social-political commentary. Deepika Bahri (2003) has underscored this limitation by suggesting that nativist analyses oversimplify the postcolonial text by adopting a ‘macrocosmic’ perspective that unearths political connotations at the expense of aesthetic nuance and formal negotiations with social and political concerns.<sup>38</sup> Bahri suggests that such perspectives reduce the text to a mere ‘documentary social text’, an explanatory tool for the postcolonial experience.<sup>39</sup> In one instance, Bahri revisits Heaney’s ‘Hercules and Antaeus’ to highlight the reductive nature of readings that attempt interpreting the poem ‘as a political allegory for postcolonial troubles in general and Northern Troubles in particular’ by imposing a contemporary framework onto its ‘timeless’ narrative.<sup>40</sup> Bahri suggests that such politically-focused readers may find the poem frustrating, as they grapple with establishing a meaningful connection between poetry and politics, given the poem’s abstraction of an immediate political context.<sup>41</sup> If the poem’s two counterposed images of Hercules lifting his arms and Antaeus lifted and banked evoke colonisation and the Northern Troubles at all, she argues, ‘they do so obliquely at best’.<sup>42</sup> This is because, Bahri argues, ‘the immediacy of contemporary issues has been *worked out*’ to ‘cast these troubles in a drama that removes us to different places and earlier times, and their protagonists into other and confusing roles’.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 64.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 77-79.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

More recent critical efforts that respond to the potential binary standoff regarding the local in postcolonial poetry can be found in Nathan Suhr-Sytsma's examination of Okigbo's 'Lament of the Masks'. Suhr-Sytsma notes that although the poem is written in tribute to W. B. Yeats, Okigbo does not simply adopt Western forms; instead, he draws upon Yoruba oriki praise poetry, reimagining 'Yeats as a Yoruba "big man"'.<sup>44</sup> As a native Igbo speaker, Okigbo's access to Yoruba poetic traditions, Suhr-Sytsma observes, was 'mediated by the colonial language of English' through 'translations published in Western Nigeria'.<sup>45</sup> Despite this mediation, Okigbo's incorporation of oriki suggests 'his commitment to a cultural nationalism that aims to transcend ethnic divisions calcified by colonial policies'.<sup>46</sup> Suhr-Sytsma identifies examples of what this thesis sees as characteristic of reworking: In traditional oriki, the praise poems are performed orally to a live audience; Okigbo reworks this quality by using English and addressing 'an absent – and deceased – person in print'.<sup>47</sup> These changes, according to Suhr-Sytsma, allow the poet 'to syncretize Yoruba materials both with motifs from classical literature and with allusions to the Yeatsian oeuvre'.<sup>48</sup> By illuminating Okigbo's commemoration of Yeats using the reworked oriki form, Suhr-Sytsma invites us to reconsider the dynamics of cultural exchange and creative adaptation in postcolonial contexts, highlighting the agency of poets like Okigbo in reshaping literary traditions and forging new modes of expression that defy reductive categorisation.

In his book *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature* (2017), Suhr-Sytsma re-evaluates anglophone postcolonial poetry by meticulously tracing the complex material and institutional processes behind its 'making', drawing upon unpublished archival materials to

---

<sup>44</sup> Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

demonstrate the importance of textual, institutional, and bibliographical elements in understanding postcolonial poetry. I will return to the value of these methods further down. By contrast, Elleke Boehmer re-examines the ways in which postcolonial writing in English can be read by stressing ‘how writing as writing, and as received by readers, gives insight into aspects of our postcolonial world’.<sup>49</sup> Boehmer holds that looking at the formal, aesthetic dimension while reading postcolonial writing ‘is something of a radical departure for a field in which the literary has often been read in terms of other orders of reality: social, political, or ethical’.<sup>50</sup> Of course, that postcolonial works have much to say on the themes of power, identity, and resistance does not mean that postcolonial writing is predominantly politics-driven or political only in its effects. Similar to these approaches, this thesis concerns itself with the range of particularities that shape the forms of postcolonial writing, proposing reworking as an aesthetic strategy that enable poets to process and articulate sociopolitical concern in a nuanced way. If postcolonial poets are ideally working toward the overarching goal of decolonisation within their literary undertakings, I suggest that they take on the literary act of reworking local materials to subvert colonial discourses and redefine cultural heritage, within the modern, interconnected globe. Focussing on how local materials are reworked in postcolonial poetry, I contend, moves us beyond simplistic engagements with the political aspects of literature. This framework acknowledges the political stakes of both writing and reading, while also illuminating the significance of aesthetic and literary strategies as qualities that deserve primary consideration.

The reductionist nature of nativist paradigms reveals itself conspicuously in their scepticism towards the poets’ use of the English language. Nativist perspectives underscore English as an

---

<sup>49</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-century Critical Readings* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

oppressive colonial linguistic legacy, posing a threat to cultural identity and linguistic purity, thereby prompting debate about whether English should serve as a medium for literary expression – regardless of whether it is used to subvert imperial power dynamics or to attain literary recognition and global impact. This is especially the case when poets evoke local materials that are charged with religious significance, as will be exemplified through the analyses of Kolatkar and Okigbo. While Marathi critics like Bhalchandra Nemade critique Kolatkar's utilisation of the English language, asserting that it estranges his cultural authenticity for the pursuit of foreign acclaim, Chinweizu, among other critics of Okigbo, disparage the poet's amalgamation of Christian and native elements as propagandistic, lamenting the displacement of traditional beliefs by Christianity among the elite.<sup>51</sup> These sentiments are not limited to the twentieth century, where, as Amit Chaudhuri notes about the 'unfolding story of the independent [Indian] nation', 'writing poetry in English was a minor, marginal, and occasionally controversial activity'.<sup>52</sup> They also resonate with the contemporary reader who might perceive the ascendancy of English in the global sphere as a predominantly hegemonic force that risks reducing diverse world literatures into mere commodities for mass consumption. After all, as Daniel Elam articulates, "there is only one reason why the "globe" is now "anglophone" in any sense: colonial dominance and oppression, British in its first iteration and American in its second".<sup>53</sup> These notions also find reflection in Aamir Mufti's *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literature* (2018), where he argues that the 'rise of

---

<sup>51</sup> Bhalchandra Nemade, 'Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Poetry' in *Indian Readings in Commonwealth Literature* ed. by G. S. Amur (New Delhi: Sterling, 1985), p. 82; Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jamie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980), p. 192.

<sup>52</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, 'Pilgrims' progress', *The Guardian*, 21 Oct 2006, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/oct/21/featuresreviews.guardianreview32>> [accessed 6 March 2024]. See also Chaudhuri, 'Arun Kolatkar and the Tradition of Loitering', in *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture* (Oxford, England: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 227.

<sup>53</sup> J. Daniel Elam, 'The Form of Global Anglo-phone Literature is Grenfell Tower', Post45: Contemporaries, (2019), <<https://post45.org/2019/02/the-form-of-global-anglophone-literature-is-grenfell-tower/>> [accessed 6 March 2024].

Anglophone has often taken the form of a reification or even an apotheosis: that it has been treated as a transparently universal good, not accompanied by a critical self-examination of its own condition of possibility'.<sup>54</sup>

The colonial legacy surrounding the English language has often cast a negative shadow on its historical and ongoing dominance. However, perspectives that discourage the literary employment of English fail to fully acknowledge the language's evolution into an anglophone identity. In the realm of the postcolonial, the words of Omaar Hena are illustrative: 'the English-language becomes uprooted, appropriated, indigenized, hybridized, and sent back out to the world again'.<sup>55</sup> The hybridity model, which I revisit further down, encourages readings of Anglophone poets based on their incorporation of indigenous place-names, terms, and references to local flora and fauna, as well as their use of dialect, despite the historical stigma associated with it, particularly in former British colonies.<sup>56</sup> A frequently cited example in this context is Shahid Ali, who weaves prayers of Arabic and Persian into his verses. As Ramazani argues, Ali's use of the Quranic expression 'ar-Rahim', one of God's ninety-nine names in Arabic, as always elucidated in his footnotes, introduces Muslim prayer into English-language poetry, thereby 'attun[ing] a literary language long saturated with Christianity to the discursive experience of the Islamic world'.<sup>57</sup> In fact, this very example prompts a reconsideration of English's global impact, viewed through a comparative historical framework. As Debjani Ganguly proposes, English's global prevalence becomes 'less threatening' when observed via a comparative historical perspective, which underscores the

---

<sup>54</sup> Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Omaar Hena, 'Globalization and Postcolonial Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, ed. Jahan Ramazani, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 251.

<sup>56</sup> Ramazani 'Poetry and Postcolonialism', p. 941.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 972.

roles of other major world languages.<sup>58</sup> Just as scholars have explored how languages like Greek, Latin, Chinese, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic impacted ancient and early modern eras, the prominence of English gains context within a broader scope.<sup>59</sup> Ganguly suggests that ‘[c]onquest, trade, migration, and imperial adventures, and cultural influence’ have bestowed certain languages with disproportionate influence in global literature; therefore, despite English’s current ubiquity, it coexists within a complex network of other prominent languages, each with a significant number of speakers.<sup>60</sup> Ganguly’s viewpoint, that languages, including English, are not isolated entities but rather part of a web of linguistic interactions that shape cultures over time, supports the emphasis in this thesis on how disparate elements can adapt, intertwine, and interact, creating a fertile ground for innovative expressions. In light of this, the reductionism of nativist paradigms toward the use of English underplays the richness of culturally specific linguistic expression offered by Anglophone postcolonial poets. By understanding its transformation and indigenisation, and engaging in a comparative mode, we gain a more nuanced comprehension of English’s role as a medium of literary expression in relation to other languages.

This focus on English as ‘a medium rather than the paragon of literariness’ is articulated by Francisca Orsini in her discussion of world literature in Indian periodicals of the late colonial period.<sup>61</sup> Orsini does not subscribe to notions that equate Anglophone literature with the English language. Instead, she highlights that Indian periodicals that presented and discussed world literature in English did not do so to catch up with the latest productions and trends from the ‘centres’, but ‘more in terms of redressing the asymmetric balance and exchange

---

<sup>58</sup> Debjani Ganguly, ‘Angloglobalism, Multilingualism and World Literature’, *Interventions* 25:5 (2023), 601-618, (p. 603), doi:10.1080/1369801X.2023.2175418.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 615-616.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Francesca Orsini, ‘World Literature, Indian Views, 1920s–1940s’, *Journal of World Literature* 4:1 (2019), 56-81 (p. 58), doi:10.1163/24056480-00401002.

between East and West and discovering the plurality of the world'.<sup>62</sup> Orsini illuminates the existence of old and new forms of multilingualism across varied and sometimes disconnected 'significant geographies', a 'formula' that emphasises that literature is not a monolithic entity but is tied to specific geographies from which it emerges and circulates.<sup>63</sup> It, thus, highlights that literature is deeply rooted in specific locales, each with its own set of cultural influences, linguistic diversity, and historical experiences. As a result, it reveals a different picture of world literature – one that is 'no longer generic and global' but captures 'the complexity of the changing interaction between the local, the regional, and the global'.<sup>64</sup> This interaction, she points out, takes place within the realms of 'worldly, productive sites of crossing; complex, unfinished paths between local and global attachments'.<sup>65</sup> Shifting the focus from generalised viewpoints to specific voices, geographies, and imaginative constructs, Orsini is attentive, in the words of Sanjay Krishnan, to 'the "claims of contextual unevenness and heterogeneity" that world literature should be so well placed to discover and highlight'.<sup>66</sup>

The colonial-era reification of European languages often functioned as a tool of oppression, culminating in the suppression of indigenous languages and cultures as well as the enforcement of Western paradigms of linguistic and cultural orientation. However, this thesis does not view the use and preservation of indigenous and minority languages as the sole way to 'speak back' in such postcolonial language debates. Neither does it adopt the hybridity perspective that regards resistance, subversion, assimilation, or hybridisation of English language as definitive markers of anglophone writing. Instead, with its emphasis on how local materials are reworked, it seeks to illuminate how these poets use language, form, and genre

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Orsini and Zecchini, 'The Locations of (World) Literature', p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

to connect with a global audience, participate in broader literary conversations, and position themselves within wider postcolonial contexts to engage with and subvert colonial narratives and structures, among other things.

In my thesis, I have chosen to focus on three postcolonial poets who primarily write and have published in English. Their heightened ‘visibility’,<sup>67</sup> arising from the language they use and publication venues, should not be interpreted as acquiescence to the expectations of colonial, Western, or global readerships and publishing markets, or aligning with such influences. This thesis argues that poets rework local materials to suit their purposes, which, if they include a desire to achieve greater visibility, does not necessarily imply a relinquishment of artistic autonomy in the sense that suggests that poets become puppets to readers and publishers located in the West. Take, for instance, Kolatkar’s “shyness of contracts”,<sup>68</sup> which, Zecchini suggests, demonstrates his reluctance to mix literature with commercial concerns and his unconditional allegiance to the ‘resolutely marginal’ and ‘anti-establishment’ Bombay subculture.<sup>69</sup> Heaney presents a more complex case, not only as a figure associated with Faber with all the connotations of literary prestige that it brings but also because, as he himself stated,

I would say that poets of Northern Ireland - not just me - became more visible and discussable than would otherwise have been the case because of the political

---

<sup>67</sup> Compared to the relative invisibility of writers examined in the project led by Orsini, which, in its gesture towards world literature, aims to make literature beyond English visible by pluralizing ‘a map whose traffics, entanglements, complexities, but also discontinuities and asymmetries, face the risk of being ironed out by reified conceptualizations of literature within global macro-systems’. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> In the words of Amit Chaudhuri, qtd in Laetitia Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 10.

<sup>69</sup> Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism*, p. 10.

conditions. But it's not right to say that these poets got attention only because of those conditions.<sup>70</sup>

Heaney is right to note that his visibility cannot only be attributed to the political circumstances of Northern Ireland, for he remained committed to his artistic integrity amidst what Suhr-Sytsma describes as invitations ‘to play by the rules of “prosaic modes of public address” in order to comment on the current situation’.<sup>71</sup> Lyric conventions, Suhr-Sytsma reminds us, citing Michael Warner, compel us to “experience “the speaking voice” not as mediated but “as transcendent”, and if we read poetry as transcendentally addressing us as individuals, “circulation may seem irrelevant, extraneous””.<sup>72</sup> Thus, while visibility may be an outcome of the choices these poets made, it would be reductive to suggest that these poets’ works were written with a Western audience in mind or to claim that their poetry collections were successful or gained wider recognition because they traded in stereotypes to appeal to such readerships.

### The ‘local’ in postcolonial poetry criticism

Hybridity is a prominent critical approach to postcolonial poetry, frequently employed by the field’s pioneer Jahan Ramazani to shed light on the aesthetic value of hybrid postcolonial poetry in response to the simplistic political direction of nativism. Ramazani focuses on the in-betweenness in the work of many Anglophone poets to illustrate that poetry, with its use of paradox, symbolism, irony, and metaphor is ‘well-suited to mediating and registering the

---

<sup>70</sup> Seamus Heaney and Karl Miller, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (BTL, 2000), p. 52. See also Suhr-Sytsma, *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature*, p. 162.

<sup>71</sup> Suhr-Sytsma, p. 165.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

contradictions of split cultural experience'.<sup>73</sup> He, for instance, examines how Walcott's *Omeros* indigenises the canonical Western characters by his paradoxical employment of the classical Greek figure of Philoctetes as a bearer of the wound motif to represent Caribbean enslavement under colonialism.<sup>74</sup> In addition to Walcott, *The Hybrid Muse* expands its exploration to encompass a diverse group of postcolonial poets, including A. K. Ramanujan, Louise Bennett, and Okot p'Bitek. Each of these poets navigates the intricate legacies of both imperial and indigenous cultural traditions, forging innovative poetic forms that convey the complexities, tensions, and ambiguities of their cultural in-betweenness. Ramazani reflects on these dynamics in 'Poetry and Postcolonialism', highlighting how A. K. Ramanujan melds the inspiration of European modernist poets like T. S. Eliot 'with ancient and medieval Dravidian poetic techniques and tropes', offering a lens into the South Asian experience under modernity.<sup>75</sup> Louise Bennett, on the other hand, crafts Creole poetry within the structure of 'the British ballad stanza', while Okot p'Bitek seamlessly combines elements of 'the long Western dramatic monologue' with the richness of 'Acoli oral traditions'.<sup>76</sup>

It should be obvious by now that my position in this thesis is at odds with both nativist and hybridity interpretive positions. I acknowledge that the hybridity model responds to the simplistic political demands of nativism by recognising and embracing the adaptations of cultural, linguistic, and socio-political elements that come with colonisation. The hybridity model pushes back against what, in the words of Ramazani himself, is the common belief that postcolonial writing 'develops by sloughing off Eurocentrism for indigeneity'.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless,

---

<sup>73</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 6.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>75</sup> Ramazani, 'Poetry and Postcolonialism', p. 940.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Jahan Ramazani, 'The Wound of History: Walcott's *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction', *PMLA*, 112:3, (1997), p. 405, doi:10.2307/462949.

its focus on postcolonial poets' adoption or adaptation of the colonisers' codes, forms, and idioms risk obscuring a subtle yet significant distinction between the 'local' and 'localised'; the former typically refers to something that incepts from a particular spatial or cultural setting, whereas the latter usually implies the appropriation, subversion or customisation to fit a particular place or culture. In this critical context, 'localisation' is part of the vocabulary of hybridity and takes the form of creolisation (creating a new cultural identity that blends elements from different cultural traditions), vernacularisation (adapting a language or culture to suit local contexts or dialects), and syncretism (the blending of different religious or cultural traditions into a new, hybrid form). These terms can be useful tools for analysing the complex processes of cultural exchange and resistance strategies that occur in postcolonial contexts; however, they carry a potential pitfall in overemphasising localisation, as a synonym for the adoption and adaptation of the colonial, at the expense of recognising the potential of the local to generate, facilitate, or even shape hybrid interactions and articulations, modern influences and inflections, and global flows and circulations. Such an emphasis, in other words, could perpetuate Eurocentric biases that have long viewed non-Western localities as reflective or derivative, peripheral, and unimportant, consequently missing other dynamics that suggest a greater level of equitable exchange. Holding onto the indigenous or, to use the idiom of this thesis, the local does not necessarily mean subscribing to a narrow essentialist nationalism. Indeed, it is possible that some postcolonial writers or critics may employ essentialist or reductive interpretations of indigeneity, for instance, by framing the identity of the indigenous people as a fixed and homogeneous category that excludes other identities or by reducing the complexity of indigenous cultures and histories to a singular narrative or symbolism. However, what distinguishes a local experience is its 'unique, experimental

indigeneity'.<sup>78</sup> This is a concept that Peter J. Kalliney uses to highlight Chinua Achebe's celebration of Okigbo as a distinctly Nigerian writer whose work embodies a fusion of cosmopolitanism with a profound understanding of Nigerian culture and experience.<sup>79</sup> Achebe argues, according to Kalliney, that Okigbo expressed himself most fully when drawing 'inspiration from domestic sources' while benefiting from being 'informed by metropolitan modernism' and classical literatures, thus creating an alternative autonomic aesthetics that transcends ideological constraints.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, rather than viewing the dynamics of identity and cultural exchange in postcolonial contexts as limited to the simple choice between either an essentialist indigeneity or localising Eurocentric culture, we need to understand and appreciate the complex and varied nature of local cultural materials as they are reworked in diverse and nuanced ways.

The critical challenge at hand is to move beyond simplistic, binary viewpoints that categorise colonial influence as embodying modernist, elitist artistic innovation and civilised religious knowledge, while perceiving local cultures through a lens of supposed primitivism. This requires a focus on poetry that captures the unique characteristics and subtleties of the local in a global, connected context. While I suggest that the distinct qualities and significance of the local are not front and centre of postcolonial poetry criticism, what may be a burgeoning revisionary trend to accord the unique cultural and historical contexts of localities their due has emerged through dialogue between postcolonial and global and world literary perspectives. Such a trend is represented in the work of Suhr-Sytsma, for instance, who delves into the mechanisms of literary production and dissemination through print and publishing

---

<sup>78</sup> Peter J. Kalliney, *The Aesthetic Cold War: Decolonization and Global Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), p. 17.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

networks, highlighting the reciprocal influence between metropole and province. Suhr-Sytsma argues that postcolonial poets engage in complex negotiations between metropolitan and provincial cultural centres, and that literary exchanges allow them to expand their perspectives without losing their identity or place in the world.<sup>81</sup> Through its ethical work of synchronic reading, then, *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature* challenges conventional diachronic interpretations of the formation of the postcolonial text, which assume that Western metropolitan centres always dictate the ideals of modernity, literary innovation, literary taste, and cultural value to provincial margins.<sup>82</sup> Instead, Suhr-Sytsma presents a narrative of individual agency and interactive relations, trans/national and trans/local poetics and publics, and cultural and aesthetic collocations in the process of creating not only postcolonial but also world anglophone poetry. Such seemingly provincial non-English poets as Okigbo and Heaney, he argues, were published by both local and metropolitan publishers because they modified the outdated idiom of the poetry they studied, and drew on local traditions, settings, and experiences, on top of their adaptation of English.<sup>83</sup>

The concept of the local has surfaced in more recent criticism of postcolonial poetry still. Ramazani's recent work *Poetry in a Global Age* (2020) represents a softening of the hybridity argument he has long championed by tracing how poetic techniques, vocabulary, and forms such as the ghazal migrate, are transplanted, and are remade in new cultural habitats and fields ranging from world literature to tourism studies and translation theory. This approach emphasises that poetry infused with local materials retains a 'long memory' of forms and words, forging 'radial connections' across centuries, continents, and languages, thereby making it inevitable for the local and the global to intersect and influence each other, rather

---

<sup>81</sup> Suhr-Sytsma, pp. 3-4.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

than existing as separate and distinct entities.<sup>84</sup> As Ramazani rightly argues in his analysis of topographical poetry, in a globalised world under modernity, ‘a loco-descriptive poem’ such as Arun Kolatkar’s *Kala Ghoda Poems* (2004), ‘is also a gloco-descriptive poem’.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Robert Spencer and Anastasia Valassopoulos’s *Postcolonial Locations: New Issues and Directions in Postcolonial Studies* (2021) emphasises a material and located approach to postcolonial poetry, bridging the gap between the global and the local. The book departs from theoretical discussions typical of postcolonial criticism to prioritise close readings of texts that evoke landscape, mobility, and memory, illuminating the politics of location and how the local cannot be understood without considering its global context while at the same time recognising the multifarious ways in which ‘the global expresses or manifests itself at the level of different locations’.<sup>86</sup>

The significance of the local is also increasingly debated in world literary studies, as we have already seen in Orsini and Zecchini’s work on the politics of location and geography and the use of vernacular languages and dialects, which has generated valuable insight into the interplay between the local and global, coloniality and modernity. Several similar scholarly projects and literary publications have emerged in world literary studies in recent years, among which Alexander Beecroft’s model in *Ecology of World Literature* (2015) stands out as particularly thought-provoking in its attempt to define the local. Recognising a methodological flaw in a scheme Arnold Toynbee developed to categorise the world’s cultures into some forty-five clearly-demarcated civilisations, Beecroft argues that the effort to break up the interlinked and continuous nature of human societies ‘into discrete

---

<sup>84</sup> Jahan Ramazani, ‘The Local Poem in a Global Age’, in *Poetry in a Global Age* ((Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 56.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Spencer and Anastasia Valassopoulos, *Postcolonial Locations: New Issues and Directions in Postcolonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1-2.

spatiotemporal units' is somewhat futile.<sup>87</sup> This is because according to Beecroft, 'cultures often blend gradually one into the other', rendering it difficult to draw anything like a strict border around a culture.<sup>88</sup> Toynbee's scheme categorises the world's cultures into civilisations, which are broader entities than individual local cultures, complicating the delineation of clear boundaries given that civilisations emerge as a result of 'complex interrelationships and participations in multiple larger-scale networks'.<sup>89</sup>

Beecroft finds in ecology an analogous metaphor to civilisations, observing ecozones of distinct boundaries such as where 'the flora and fauna of the Americas differ from that of Eurasia, or where the Sahara or the Himalayas present so forbidding a barrier to many species so as to constitute a fairly impermeable boundary'.<sup>90</sup> At other times, Beecroft argues, like in 'southern China where the Palearctic and Indo-Malayan ecozones meet, the boundaries are better understood as borders of transition'.<sup>91</sup> This notion of ecozones as circumscribed yet able to participate in multiple and transitional networks is resonant with the paradox I relate to local materials as both culturally specific and engaged in colonial and global interactions. Of course, Beecroft does not mean to collapse the world's cultures as well as ecozones into one, homogeneous entity, for, while there is a certain interconnectedness and continuity between them, there remain elements that ensure some degree of local specificity. Beecroft identifies ecological biomes – typological conditions of climate and terrain found in specific locations – as markers of ecological uniqueness. Beecroft builds on ecological biomes to develop a working paradigm of 'six literary ecologies' to study literature.<sup>92</sup> These literary biomes are

---

<sup>87</sup> Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 24.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-24.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 27. These literary ecologies are categorised as 'epichoric', 'panchoric', 'cosmopolitan', 'vernacular', 'national', and 'global', as outlined on pp. 33-36.

defined by ‘particular patterns of ecological constraints’ that operate on ‘the circulation of literary texts in a variety of different historical contexts’.<sup>93</sup> Just as ecological biomes are shaped by factors like temperature, precipitation, and soil quality, Beecroft argues, literary biomes are influenced by determinants such as ‘linguistic situation’, ‘political world’, ‘religion’, ‘economics’, and ‘technologies of distribution’.<sup>94</sup> This model is valuable for understanding how literature circulates within and between different cultural contexts, illuminating both the interconnectedness and the distinctiveness of local literary traditions within a global framework.

### **Contextualising ‘the local’ in postcolonialism**

This thesis examines the dynamic interplay between postcolonial poets, their immediate contexts, and the wider world. These poets frequently draw upon local materials of culture and spirituality – such as myths, belief systems, and cultural practices – using them as metaphors, symbols, and allusions to imbue their work with layers of meaning. Crucially, postcolonial poets are not confined to their local contexts; they actively engage with and borrow from other cultures. The central intervention of this thesis is to reframe the limiting terms with which postcolonial poets are perceived on matters of culture. While Western poets like T. S. Eliot are often recognised for their intellectual curiosity and resourcefulness in integrating cross-cultural references, postcolonial poets are often framed as either culturally confined – expected to write within a framework of resistance that seeks to restore a pure, pre-

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>94</sup> As listed on pp. 25-27.

colonial sense of identity – or culturally weak, more dominated by Western influences than rooted in their local traditions.<sup>95</sup>

In earlier sections of this introduction, I addressed how nativist criticism tends to emphasise the poet's role in preserving cultural identity from external influences, which risks promoting an essentialist view of culture - one that sees cultural identity as fixed and defined by inherent qualities. On the other hand, the hybridity model, as articulated by critics like Jahan Ramazani, while acknowledging the inevitable cultural exchanges between local and colonial cultures, often frames these hybrid spaces as being primarily shaped by Western influences.

Consider Ramazani's analysis of A. K. Ramanujan in *The Hybrid Muse*. Ramazani argues that Ramanujan's later collections, particularly *Second Sight*, 'absorb and remake the forms, tonality, and tropes inherited from English-language poets such as Williams, Stevens, and Yeats brilliantly fusing them with the traditions of ancient and medieval Dravidian poetry'.<sup>96</sup>

Here, Ramazani highlights the cross-cultural synthesis in Ramanujan's work, but characterises the American and European canon as the starting point for his creative innovation. My argument takes a different point of departure. In *Heavensgate*, for instance, I argue that Okigbo constructs a 'personal religion' by combining elements of local Igbo

---

<sup>95</sup> As is well known, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) draws heavily from a variety of cultural and spiritual traditions, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism. Pericles Lewis's reading of *The Waste Land* illustrates my observation regarding the disparity in the criteria by which we evaluate the cultural engagement of postcolonial poets compared to their Western counterparts. Lewis praises Eliot for his intricate weaving of diverse mythological and literary references with contemporary issues, such as the aftermath of World War I and the fragmentation of modern life, ultimately creating a modernist work of significant intellectual and aesthetic richness. Although Lewis critiques Eliot for potentially disorienting readers, arguing that his complex allusions can make the poem feel fragmented or inaccessible, this critique remains related to the literary merit of the work rather than interrogating Eliot's cultural integrity. This prompts reflection on how different the landscape is for postcolonial poets who use similar intertextual strategies. As this thesis explores, the criticism directed at postcolonial poets using external materials, particularly postcolonial and metropolitan, often carries a weight that questions their cultural authenticity. From a nativist perspective, for instance, these poets can be labelled as inauthentic to their own cultures, catering to colonial expectations, or aiming to appease a global readership. Pericles Lewis, *The Waste Land, Modernism Lab* (Yale University),

<<https://campuspress.yale.edu/modernismlab/the-waste-land/>> [accessed 17 October 2024]. This article is appropriated from Pericles Lewis's *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 129-151.

<sup>96</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*, p. 76.

spirituality and Christianity. This synthesis does not reflect a passive absorption of Christian influences; instead, it emerges from an active reworking of the Igbo cosmological worldview – which posits a harmony between male and female deities – to embrace the Christian Father. The Igbo cosmological worldview is further reworked to address Okigbo's self-perception as a modern poet in postcolonial Nigeria. Where Ramazani's theoretical framework understands cultural synthesis, such as Okigbo's 'personal religion', it does not account for the hybrid fusions that arise from the poet's active engagement with his local heritage. In other words, my thesis aims to redirect this discussion about postcolonial poetry and local materials by suggesting that postcolonial poets engage in complex cultural exchanges with creativity and agency, and draw from local materials with a deep understanding of how to blend the old with the new, the local with the global.<sup>97</sup>

Of course, I do not suggest that postcolonial poets are writing from the same position as Western poets. Postcolonial poets operate in contexts marked by the historical legacies of subjugation, marginalisation, and cultural erasure. Yet, given the imbalance of power between coloniser and colonised, framing postcolonial poets as encountering hybrid spaces overshadowed by colonial culture does not, in my view, adequately capture their active, innovative, and creative interactions with their localities. My analyses of the three poets in this thesis remain grounded in a critical understanding of colonial histories and their implications – amid the more expansive interest in the local in global and world literary studies I discussed earlier – because the creative reworkings of local materials can be especially pronounced within the ambit of what is often recognised as modern and globalising

---

<sup>97</sup> In postcolonial poetry studies, a substantial body of critical work is inspired by Ramazani's use of the hybridity metaphor. I do not intend to paint this diverse group of critics with too broad a brush. However, in my effort to place the local more at the centre of the discussion, I deliberately limit engagement with these examples to avoid reinforcing the idea that postcolonial poets write in the shadows of Western influences. That said, I do occasionally address, throughout the chapters, how the thesis diverges from the hybridity model.

contexts. My aim is not to idealise the local in the face of colonialism, nor to diminish its agency, but to pay close attention to the particularities of different local materials and their textual reworkings as indicators of how the local manifests in situations of postcoloniality. The paradox of the local – which is both culturally specific and moves globally – takes on added complexity within this context because European colonialism and knowledge systems have profoundly impacted how the local is understood, leading to its distortion, appropriation, and even erasure. Kolatkar, for instance, finds within bhakti traditions an anti-establishment sentiment that inspires him to challenge post-independence Hindu nationalist efforts to homogenise India's spiritual diversity into a singular brahmanical expression – this is a perspective that, as I will detail in my chapter on Kolatkar, Hindu nationalists took after colonialists' efforts to find a denominator for the admixture of spiritual paths they confronted in the subcontinent. This medieval Indian anti-establishment stance is not only resistant to contemporary attempts at reductionism but also prefigures the critiques of Euro-modernists, who similarly question hegemonic institutionalisations of religion and culture. Kolatkar reinvents the bhakti, however, rather than claim its historical value for its own sake. In Heaney's *North*, the ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess, Nerthus, in the Iron Age's Jutland bog feature as a reflection of the historical and artistic liminality arising from the cultural and spatial proximity between Britain and Northern Ireland. Here, the local is multi-layered and porous, made up of a diverse range of perspectives and positions, creating a space wherein the historical and the contemporary, the Irish and the British, and the national and the colonial interact. Heaney neither draws on colonial stereotypes of the Irish as driven by tribal atavistic violence nor endorses a metropolitan attitude that absolves itself of any culpability in the violence. Instead, the collection's range of attitudes towards violence – from empathy to voyeurism to self-criticism – mirror the complexities of Northern Irish identity. Okigbo shows

how ‘the local’ interacts with – and is resilient in the midst of – the imposition of foreign religious beliefs by colonial culture, in this case by the Catholic mission in Africa, whose emphasis on the Father God risked eroding femininity in Igbo cosmologies. Negotiating two worlds, Okigbo blends local religious practices with colonial ones to develop what he describes as a ‘personal religion’. His reworking of local spirituality through this syncretic approach stands as an example of how the local and the colonial are mutually transformative, even as the former retains its resilience and capacity to enrich future expressions.

All three collections show how postcolonial poetry offers a valuable arena for exploring the interplay between colonialism and local elements. It is a complex interplay because, on the one hand, when postcolonial poets incorporate cultural materials in their works, they often reflect a deep preoccupation with the pre-colonial past, with a desire to rediscover and give voice to the parts of history that colonialism degraded, distorted, or silenced. Through the use of local materials, then, poets are able to reimagine the connection to cultural heritage, scrutinise the complexities of their cultural identity, and reclaim cultural traditions that were marginalised or suppressed during the colonial period, thereby asserting a sense of cultural autonomy and independence. On the other hand, postcolonial poets, depending on their age and generation, are often shaped by colonial education, travel, and the location of publication. These factors place them in a unique position to aesthetically mediate between local and imperially transmitted cultural forms, traditions, and languages. As a result, poetry’s ‘local materials’ become valuable for poets producing works that articulate the intercultural exchange that occurred with colonialism, thereby challenging binary oppositions between the coloniser and colonised, centre and periphery, and tradition and modernity. This trans-localism is further buttressed by global exchanges at mid-century that intensified towards the end of twentieth century, which foregrounded the pressing concerns of reconciling local with

global influences and perspectives. The poetic realm, then, expands to speak not only for local realities, experiences, and standpoints but also with broader global currents and concerns. Rather than restate the dilemma of choosing between addressing the local versus the non-local, my thesis suggests a degree of inevitable convergence. The postcolonial context offers a productive space for creativity and invention, partly because of the ironies and ambiguities emerging from this space of cultural interaction. Poets lean on ‘the local’ to reach out to the world beyond; they exercise artistic agency within a space informed by postcolonial experience and poetic intentions.

## **Methodology**

### Challenges and limits in addressing local specificity

It is challenging for any individual scholar to possess the full linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary knowledge required to do justice to the multiple local articulations. This is especially true because the local is not merely a surface addition to Western literary and cultural traditions – a local flavour added to English language poetry – but rather a rich, complex, multifaceted and constantly evolving set of cultural and historical markers. Paying attention to the local in postcolonial poetry entails not only recognising what is being evoked but how and why. For instance, Okigbo’s portrayal of the mother Idoto is not merely a superficial representation of traditional Igbo spirituality in an English poem. Initially, he relocates her near to the Christian father in the heaven’s gate, subsequently giving her the guise of a white muse familiar in Western literature. This strategic transformation enables her collaboration with inspiring stars to serve Okigbo’s poetic ontology. Unfortunately, this depth of engagement is frequently lacking in conventional critical approaches to postcolonial poetry. While his book *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), does touch upon the presence of the

local, Ramazani primarily focuses on how postcolonial poets invigorate English language poetry through indigenous metaphors, rhythms, linguistic forms and genres. Within a context of cross-national migration, globalisation, and modernity, Ramazani attempts to present a multi-directional approach that locates so-called Third-World poets such as Walcott and Okigbo in the category of modernism alongside leading Western modernists like Eliot, arguing that these poets ‘post-colonize Euromodernism and Euromodernize the postcolonial’.<sup>98</sup> Despite this, Ramazani often tends to subordinate such poets to the ways in which postcolonial literary strategies have been imported from metropolitan modernism, as when referring to Okigbo’s adaption of the modernist apocalypse of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* to represent the Nigerian civil war.<sup>99</sup>

Therefore, it is imperative to develop a practice that looks closely at poetry that is steeped in locality while also aware of the challenges and opportunities involved in seeking out the most relevant forms of knowledge and critical tools. Here, I should acknowledge a limitation associated with embracing a perspective that centres on the local: the scarcity of readily available materials in places where we expect to find them, such as libraries and bookstores.

In an essay about the ‘invisibility’ of the little institutionalised Pulaar literature, Mélanie Bourlet talks about how, at the outset of her research in 2003, there was minimal information available on contemporary creative writing in Pulaar.<sup>100</sup> The only two articles that were accessible led Bourlet to their authors, who were linguists themselves, and thus helped ‘to create as exhaustive a bibliography as possible of contemporary works of literature in

---

<sup>98</sup> Jahan Ramazani, ‘Modernist Bricolage, Postcolonial Hybridity’, in *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 108.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Mélanie Bourlet, ‘Cosmopolitanism, Literary Nationalisms and Linguistic Activism: A Multi-local Perspective on Pulaar’ *Journal of World Literature*, 4:1, 35-55 (2019), (pp. 39-40), doi:10.1163/24056480-00401004.

Pulaar'.<sup>101</sup> Of course, the ‘quest’ for these sources sometimes ‘required a multi-located field practice’; yet, as Bourlet notes, online databases and book-selling platforms often allowed easy access and facilitated obtaining materials from distant sources.<sup>102</sup> In this respect, I second Bourlet, as researches of this nature must seize the opportunity to explore different avenues and acquire necessary materials. In my experience, given that numerous sources that document, anthologise, and explain local materials are now public domain, digital libraries and databases have been especially useful for locating and accessing them. P. V. Glob’s anthropological account of the bog people, which inspired Heaney, and Tukaram’s collected poems, whose echo resonates in Kolatkar’s bhakti-inspired work are noteworthy examples. This free repository of digitised texts, which are rarely taught at universities and thus are absent from the library shelves, might otherwise be difficult to obtain.

### A close reading perspective

Close readings of the primary texts will form the foundation of the study, with special attention given to how each author selects and reworks local materials while navigating issues of locality, colonialism, modernity, and globalisation. Unlike practical criticism, which often isolates texts from their broader context, my approach to close reading aims to be both literary-oriented and context-sensitive, drawing on biography, earlier criticism and the poet’s interviews and critical writings if available. In focusing on the concept of ‘reworking’, my thesis embraces both externalist and internalist approaches; on the one hand it illuminates the textual strategies and innovations employed by poets as they engage with local materials in ways that are both aesthetically and politically constitutive, while it explores the interaction

---

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

between these poetic elements and the social, cultural, and historical factors that are implied or suggested by the text itself, on the other.

This approach is in keeping with Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler's argument for a version of practical criticism that begins first with the works and 'elements of technique that shape their effects and meanings', using these as points of departure to open up a distinct understanding of the conditions 'in which these works are first activated'.<sup>103</sup> They call this approach a decolonised form of 'practical criticism that seeks a work's technical and formal *context of intelligibility*'.<sup>104</sup> Here, the term 'intelligibility' is not used to suggest that there is a correct interpretation of a work's meaning but to highlight the need for a critical practice that 'inhabit[s] the constraints of the material' faced by 'peripheral' writers.<sup>105</sup> Etherington and Zimbler critique traditional practical criticism for isolating texts from their contexts and assuming a 'universal standpoint' that prioritises 'the sensibilities' of a privileged few.<sup>106</sup> However, this does not mean that they advocate merely countering practical criticism by 'prioritizing context over text'; instead, they encourage an approach that reads '*context in text*', arguing that 'close attention to literary particularities' offers a more 'immanent route' to understanding context.<sup>107</sup> In this sense, they suggest that recuperating 'the configuration of potentiality in a given moment and place that impels and shapes the work and makes possible its emergence into meaning' might be a necessary step in reading the text.<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler, 'Decolonize Practical Criticism?' *English: Journal of the English Association* 70: 270 (2021), 227–236 (p. 233), doi:10.1093/english/efab017.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>108</sup> Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler, 'Field, Material, Technique: On Renewing Postcolonial Literary Criticism', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 49:3 (2014), 279–297 (p. 282), doi:10.1177/0021989414538435.

By promoting a more involved reading practice, I also take my cue from Elleke Boehmer, who emphasises that reading should be an active and imaginative practice. Boehmer conceives of reading as ‘a conversation between the reader and the text’ in which the former comes to understand the ‘cognitive processes’ involved therein and appreciates how ‘perceptions are directed and enlivened through them’.<sup>109</sup> Such an active reading practice intervenes in historical assumptions about postcolonial studies, which have tended to prioritise the ‘representational’ concerns of the literary text over its ‘formal or aesthetic’ technicalities, by illuminating that literature is not merely a means of representation but also subject to interpretation.<sup>110</sup> Likewise, Spencer et al., aiming to decolonise what and how we read, call for reading ‘carefully and rigorously’ texts that ‘speak eloquently about their *and our* locations in time and space’.<sup>111</sup> A careful reading deems the act of reading outside nativist paradigms indispensable because such texts often ‘stretch and bother us, baffle and even offend us’, thereby making it imperative to attend to how writers perceive the world, themselves, and the cultural dynamics underlying the postcolonial experience, irrespective of whether the views align with or differ from the reader’s own worldview, which is measured up with some familiar moral or political yardstick.<sup>112</sup> Such a reading practice, however, they emphasise, should not overlook ‘the larger contexts (disciplinary, political, economic, etc.) in which the local is invariably implicated’.<sup>113</sup> These seemingly disparate sets of methodological debates about text versus context, representation versus interpretation, and politics versus aesthetics relate to my focus on reworked local materials in postcolonial poetry inasmuch as they call for a more attentive reading practice that accounts for the formal and technical

---

<sup>109</sup> Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics*, p. 2.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>111</sup> Spencer, and Valassopoulos, *Postcolonial Locations*, p. 8.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

dimensions of poetic works, as well as the social and cultural contexts with which these works engage.

The structure of the three chapters is designed to enhance my comprehensive analysis of the three poets. It remains consistent across all chapters. Each chapter opens with an exploration of the poet's method in engaging with the selected local materials, highlighting the reworkings undertaken and to what purposes. Then, I examine the local contexts each collection presents, starting with the broader historical accounts of the regions and cultures represented in the texts. I do not offer extensive overviews but focus on episodes that are relevant to my subject matter. For instance, I focus on moments spanning from precolonial to post-independent India to explain the formation of brahmanism as an organised belief system in conflict with Kolatkar's anti-established and inclusive idea of India. In Heaney, I focus more on episodes in the colonial history of Northern Ireland to articulate the dialectic of the Troubles as a sectarian conflict shaped by a long and complicated history of complicity with the British Empire, as well as racial and spatial proximity to Britain and Europe. These factors render the Troubles more than a binary conflict, prompting Heaney to choose to rework elements from the Vikings and the bog past because they reflect the integrated and protracted history of the region. Finally, I focus on instances of the imperial presence of Christian missionaries in Igboland, Nigeria, to delineate their disruptive influences on the Igbo cosmological worldview.

Following these broader contextual accounts, I analyse the local materials used in the poetry, explaining their characteristics and relevance to the unique socio-political and cultural factors that shaped the poets literary styles and thematic concerns. Interviews and other critical writings by the poets add a valuable dimension in this regard, providing insights into the poets' creative process, personal experience, intentions and perspectives on the local materials

reworked in their works. This wide range of secondary sources also allow me to uncover the subtle ways in which the poets have self-conceived of the local and the degree to which poetry can offer a unique and complex way of engaging with the local element. An additional layer of context I consider is a cross-section of past criticism, as work by these poets has been received and interpreted by different audiences in different cultural and historical contexts. In each chapter, I dedicate a section to revisiting previous critical responses to reevaluate how postcolonial poetry that engages with local materials can be misinterpreted in the absence of comprehensive broad and immediate contexts. In this sense, I pave the path for the final section of textual analyses to examine freely and thoroughly, both in content and technique, the ways in which the poets rework local materials to suit their poetic ends.

While a comparative approach can be a valuable tool for analysing literature, it is important to acknowledge its limitations, particularly in how it may overlook the intricacies of each individual poet in favour of constructing a comparative narrative that emphasises the commonalities and distinctions between their works. A case study approach is thus, I believe, more appropriate for recognising the distinctive voices and perspectives that each author brings to their work. Nevertheless, the conclusion of this thesis reflects comparatively on the three poets and collections to provide a broader understanding of the approaches these three postcolonial anglophone poets take to ‘reworking local materials’ across different cultural and literary contexts. By balancing both the case study and comparative approaches, this thesis aims to offer an in-depth exploration of the ways in which these three poets express spiritual, cultural, and artistic identity in the context of postcolonialism.

## Selection of poets

The three poets selected for this thesis – Arun Kolatkar, Seamus Heaney, and Christopher Okigbo – all wrote during the middle decades of the twentieth century, a period marked by significant global change and upheaval. Unlike many of their peers, these English language poets, did not emigrate to the metropole – in this case, England – for education or a professional writing career. The non-metropolitan locations within which these poets primarily wrote and published assumes a pivotal role in the analysis, as it offers a lens through which to discern how they grappled with the macroscopic constructs of nation, region, and continent, intrinsically linked to the local situations they invoked. This perspective shows how they reinvent and reallocate these constructs to realign with networks of discrepant geographies and cultures, all while producing their works from specific locales. The different geographical locations and categories of postcolonial experience also means that each poet highlights the interplay between the spatial and temporal particularities of the local and the broader political and cultural contexts in a different way. Kolatkar, Heaney, and Okigbo have uniquely negotiated a complex set of interrelated tensions. These tensions encompass the dialectic between the ancient, steeped in tradition, and the contemporary, imbued with modernity; the interplay of the local and the global; the dynamics of colonial and colonised experiences; and the interweaving of the personal, both on the individual and artistic levels, with the public sphere which encloses political, communal, ancestral, and social dimensions.

The process of selecting poets is not only about choosing poets based on their geographic and cultural backgrounds but also considering what they offer in terms of the distinct genre of poetry. This is an aspect that is especially pertinent to anyone interested in postcolonial poetry because, as Ramazani has argued, poetry, despite its ability to incorporate elements of other

genres, such as the realism of the novel, the ritualism of prayer, the melodies of song, or the abstraction of theory, remains distinctive in its compression, allusiveness, dense figuration, self-reflexivity, and sonic and visual formal inventiveness.<sup>114</sup> The selection of poetry for this thesis aims to showcase a range of poetic distinctiveness. For instance, Heaney's liminal space explores the tensions between poetic aestheticization, direct political rhetoric and insensitive documentary style. In seeking to forge a personal religion, Okigbo's work moves between the strict ritualism of prayer and the freedom of poetic expression. Finally, Kolatkar's innovative use of language and poetic voice defies the linearity of history while moving through spiritual and literary traditions. In other words, the distinct nature of poetry is a crucial aspect for each of these poets as they navigate the use of local materials in their work. Mythology, religion, and history each came with their own specific aesthetics, dogmas, and linearities. However, through their poetry, the poets were able to negotiate these constraints and showcase their individual artistic visions.

In arranging the chapters of my thesis, I prioritise a thematic progression in how postcolonial poets engage with local materials over the historical chronology of publication. I begin with an analysis of Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*, examining how the bhakti movement, characterised by its anti-establishment energy and emphasis on direct, personal expression, intersects with Euro-modernist frameworks introduced to India through British colonialism. The bhakti tradition serves as an example of a local material that is compatible with colonial discourse, rather than standing in direct opposition to it. By starting with this example, I lay the foundation for my thesis: local materials can be reworked in ways that emphasise that they are not rigid, limited, or exclusionary, but rather adaptive and relevant to contemporary contexts,

---

<sup>114</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 15.

which are influenced by colonialism. In the second chapter, I examine how Seamus Heaney's *North* benefits from the rich symbolism of the bog myth to connect Northern Ireland with a wider Northern European heritage. Heaney recontextualises the legacy of the sacrificial rituals of the Mother Goddess Nerthus into the contemporary context of the Troubles, positioning the local in a space of liminality that resists simple binary distinctions. Placing Heaney in the middle serves as a bridge between Kolatkar's exploration of a local tradition that finds compatibility with colonial modernity and Christopher Okigbo's reclamation of a more confrontational form of the local. Okigbo's invocation of the female deity Idoto contrasts the emphasis on the patriarchal monotheism of Christianity. However, as I argue in my final chapter, the poet does not use this contrast to draw a rigid distinction between the local and the colonial; he neither mourns the decline of Idoto's worship due to colonial influence nor rejects that influence. Instead, he reworks the Igbo cosmological worldview to evolve a 'personal religion' that integrates elements of both belief systems and negotiates their place within the modern, postcolonial landscape he navigates as a priest-poet. This arrangement constructs a narrative that transitions from the compatibility Kolatkar invests in, to the liminality that Heaney benefits from, and ultimately culminates in the contrast that Okigbo negotiates. This progression illuminates each collection's unique presentation of the local and reveals the varied interactions between the local and the colonial in postcolonial poetry, challenging reductionist views of the local as static, isolated, or inherently oppositional.

This thesis captures the extent to which local myths and worldviews, spiritual belief systems and rituals, literary styles and traditions have proved dynamic and compelling materials for reworking in postcolonial poetry. Local materials are not fixed and unchanged, and reworking them to suit specific needs does not make them any less culturally-specific. Rather, it enriches their relevance and accessibility to a wider reading public, even when - perhaps because - they

are recontextualised in a contemporary context and augmented with new elements, as long as the poetic voice remains distinctive and true to the local experience it represents. If poets write with the aim of contributing to a national or regional literary tradition of sorts, they should do so by crafting good poems that capture the intricacies of lived experiences. A poem, I believe, cannot be good if it simply subscribes to reductive, prepackaged, or predictable narratives. Unlike readings that attend to hybrid spaces that are shaped by colonialism, I value the poets for establishing reciprocal connections that begin from their respective local context and then extend to cultivate trans-local nonaligned networks of their own. The local, in this sense, can shape hybrid fusions, proactively anticipate modernity rather than passively accept a modernity derived from colonialism, and initiate global energies rather than simply being influenced by them. Poets, as I interpret them, are not passive in such equations; instead, they keenly observe instances of equitable exchange and illuminate, perhaps even dramatize them, through creative reworkings that recognise poetry as something more than a mere mechanical sedimentation or reinforcement of binaries and stereotypes. My goal is to offer to postcolonial poetry studies a more careful and attuned reading practice than the ready-to-hand hybrid model, which tends to misread or efface the agency of the local in its relationship to the colonial when countering reductive nativist interpretations which, in their turn, confine the poets' evocation of the local to a mere revival of a precolonial past.

## Chapter One: Arun Kolatkar: Bhakti Poetics in Post-independence India

In *Jejuri* (1976), Arun Kolatkar offers a contemporary take on the devotional vision and poetics of the bhakti tradition, which took shape in India between the sixth and seventeenth centuries as a response to the rigid hierarchies and institutionalised religion of brahman Hinduism. As Arvind Krishna Mehrotra notes, the bhakti movement, which spanned centuries and regions, prioritised ‘the informal over the formal, the spontaneous over the prescribed, and the vernacular over Sanskrit’.<sup>1</sup> I argue that Kolatkar’s engagement with this tradition is not an attempt to return to any original form but rather a recontextualization. He adapts and contemporises the bhakti spirit to resonate with modern India through the example of the temple-town Jejuri. The bhakti saint-poets’ rejection of caste hierarchies and ritual formalism, alongside their embrace of direct devotional experience, resonates profoundly with Kolatkar’s modernist sensibilities, allowing him to craft a poetic voice that is at once deeply rooted in the past and attuned to contemporary realities. In *Jejuri*, as I will elucidate throughout this chapter, the sacred is not confined to the temple, nor is devotion expressed through elaborate rituals. Instead, Kolatkar cultivates a spirituality through internal reflection, locates the divine in the everyday, and employs a style that eschews ornamentation in favour of quotidian immediacy.

Central to my argument is the proposition that Kolatkar’s engagement with bhakti poetry demonstrates that the turn to local materials in postcolonial poetry does not necessarily entail a nativist retreat into a fixed notion of tradition. While bhakti can indeed be seen as a precursor to Euro-American modernism – prefiguring its emphasis on individual experience, unadorned expression, and the rejection of conventional forms and establishments –

---

<sup>1</sup> Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ‘Introduction’ in *Songs of Kabir*, trans. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, preface by Wendy Doniger (New York: New York Review Books, 2011), p. xxi.

Kolatkar's approach neither glorifies the chronological precedence of the bhakti tradition nor isolates it from external influences. Instead, Kolatkar contributes to the bhakti discourse he inherited with an English-language poetry collection that is situated in modern India. *Jejuri* reworks bhakti devotional vision in a contemporary context and in English for two subversive purposes. First, Kolatkar offers a nonessentialist narrative of India, highlighting the internal diversity of its spiritual traditions and resisting the Hindu nationalist pursuit of a unified brahman identity. Second, building on this, he situates his spiritual and creative contemporaneity within a continuum that stretches from medieval India to the present, thereby emphasising the amorphous nature of India's cultural and literary heritage and its openness to external influences. This, in turn, enables him to imagine larger, more spacious structures of historical belonging and membership in a range of poetic constituencies.

Admittedly, *Jejuri* is not Kolatkar's only attempt to engage with the bhakti tradition; nor is he the only figure bringing bhakti poetry into modern and global literary discourse. Before Kolatkar, Rabindranath Tagore translated the prominent bhakti saint-poet Kabir, introducing his work to a global audience. Even Ezra Pound tried his hand at Kabir, as well as Robert Bly, who, as Mehrotra once noted, sourced his Kabir's translation from Tagore's, since 'he does not know Hindi'.<sup>2</sup> While this practice of translating from other translations can create complications, it speaks to the growing global interest in bhakti poetry. Kabir's popularity in translation led to two distinct approaches: literal and interpretive.<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as Vinay Dharwadker and Linda Hess, for instance, have approached bhakti translations through an

---

<sup>2</sup> Mehrotra in Bharat Iyer, 'An Interview with Arvind Krishna Mehrotra', *Eclectica* 17.1 (Jan/Feb 2013) <<https://www.eclectica.org/v17n1/iyer.html>> [accessed 10 September 2024].

<sup>3</sup> As explained in Mehrotra's 'Introduction' to *Songs of Kabir*, where he distinguishes between two translation practices in relation to Kabir: a literal approach, in which translations 'closely follow the printed text', and an older, interpretive method that 'responds to and illuminates the performative improvisatory tradition' from which Kabir's songs emerged and were transmitted (pp. xxiv-xxv).

academic lens, often striving for literal accuracy to capture every word.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Mehrotra's approach in *Songs of Kabir* embraces the dynamic and evolving nature of bhakti compositions. As Mehrotra himself explains, 'I threw a lot out, lines I found to be repetitive or formulaic. They did not work for me, at least not in English. We should not forget that a lot of bhakti poetry is full of clichés; it's how the oral tradition survives; it's the nature of the beast'.<sup>5</sup> I shall address the complex history of bhakti orality, transcription, and transmission further below. For now, I want to emphasise that Mehrotra's translation of Kabir, alongside Kolatkar's contemporaneous work on translating bhakti poets such as Tukaram, Namdeo, Janabai, and Muktaba, as well as efforts by his peers Dilip Chitre and Gieve Patel, represent a collective effort among Indian poets to rework this tradition through translation.

Laetitia Zecchini provides a crucial framework for understanding this collective effort. Unlike the more literal translations, Zecchini argues that Kolatkar's approach – part of a broader trend among Indian poets like Mehrotra and Chitre – goes beyond merely rendering ancient texts into English; it actively transforms them into contemporary idioms, such as American slang, to renew these ancient works and make them relevant to modern readers. For example, she suggests that Mehrotra 'translates Kabir in a resolutely modern way', selectively choosing 'from the Kabir corpus and using neologisms, slang and anachronisms ('dreadlocks', 'bullshit', 'chromosomes', 'mascara', 'aftershave', 'Faber poets', 'Sing Sing', 'sucker', 'Fearlessburg', etc.)'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, she points out that Kolatkar blends the bhakti voices with 'the untrained and improvised voices of American blues and folk singers', employing 'the same casual familiarity, slangy idiom, irreverence, and ecstasy found in both traditions'.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Mehrotra interviewed by Bharat Iyer.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Laetitia Zecchini, 'Contemporary Bhakti Recastings: Recovering a Demotic Tradition, Challenging Nativism, Fashioning Modernism in Indian Poetry', *Interventions*, 16:2 (2014), 257-276, (p. 266), doi:10.1080/1369801X.2013.798128.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 264.

Zecchini argues that Kolatkar's translations of Tukaram, much like Mehrotra's translations of Kabir, owe as much to modernist aesthetics – drawing inspiration from figures like 'Ezra Pound, e. e. cummings, and William Carlos Williams' – as they do to the bhakti poetics of 'Tukaram, Namdev, and Kabir'.<sup>8</sup> In the absence of an 'Indian English Creole' or a form of English that mirrors Kabir's colloquial and 'syncretic idiom', Zecchini notes that poets like Kolatkar and Mehrotra turned to a type of 'Americanese' that captures the direct and informal style of the bhakti, thereby transposing it into a 'vernacular' form.<sup>9</sup> This transposition, she argues, can be partly attributed to the fact that Indian poets have been avid readers of American poetry, along with their acquisition of 'American slang from films' and other influences such as 'the blues and folk music'.<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter, I explore the intersection between bhakti and modernism from a different perspective than Zecchini. In my evaluation, her approach aligns with the hybridity model, which, as I argued in my introduction to this thesis, overemphasises the localisation of outside influences – here 'Americanese' – to demonstrate how postcolonial poets' create hybrid spaces. Whereas Zecchini argues that 'American modernists like William Carlos Williams had created their own idiom and local form, distinct from British influences, thereby paving the way for linguistic and cultural emancipation in India', I suggest that it is the bhakti saint-poets who paved such a path.<sup>11</sup> Kolatkar's engagement with the bhakti vision is deeply rooted in its prophetic resonance with modern spiritual struggles. His attraction to bhakti saint-poets stems from their resistance to institutionalised religion and their emphasis on personal spiritual experience, offering a devotional vision that is compatible with – even anticipates – modern self-awareness. The bhakti sensibility, which breaks free from the ritualistic and

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

elitist practices associated with brahman priests, is not only philosophical or thematic but also stylistic. It uses vernacular, regional languages and a simple idiom grounded in everyday experience instead of Sanskrit, which is often regarded as ‘the language of gods and the preserve of Brahmins’.<sup>12</sup> This stylistic departure foreshadows key aspects of Euro-American modernist expression, particularly in its emphasis on rejecting elitist, classical forms in favour of a simpler and more direct style that diverges from ornate, ‘courtly’ refinement.<sup>13</sup> Kolatkar’s return to bhakti is a form of cultural rootedness, then, but this does not preclude *Jejuri* from serving as a meeting point between post-independence India and Euro-American modernists, as I will make clear later in the chapter. The collection responds to the challenges of spiritual and social modernity in India, recontextualised in the twentieth century and composed in English, and thus become accessible to a contemporary, global readership. Thus, while Zecchini rightly identifies the overlap between bhakti and modernist aesthetics, I argue that Kolatkar’s *Jejuri* deserves, above all, to be read for its engagement with the bhakti tradition as a living, dynamic force, capable of engaging with modernity on its own terms.

Understanding bhakti poetry necessitates grappling with its historical roots in the oral tradition and the inherent challenges of transcription and transmission. Bhakti figures are historically elusive, and they become more elusive still by the unreliable narratives that surround their lives. As Mehrotra notes in his introduction to *Songs of Kabir*, ‘separating the authentic from the spurious in Kabir is a hopelessly tangled affair’.<sup>14</sup> Kabir’s poetry was oral, never written down in his lifetime; later it would be transmitted by followers, scholars, and

---

<sup>12</sup> Mehrotra, ‘Introduction’ in *Songs of Kabir*, p. xxi.

<sup>13</sup> Here, I draw on Sheldon Pollock’s observation that Kabir ‘introduced a far more demotic, uncourtly, or even anticourtly, element, in both form and content, into the literary bloodstream’, a point I will further elaborate later in the chapter. Sheldon Pollock, ‘Indian’, in *How Literatures Begin: A Global History*, ed. Joel B. Lande and Denis Feeney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> Mehrotra, ‘Introduction’ in *Songs of Kabir*, p. xxix.

admirers, which resulted in thousands of poems attributed to him and multiple versions of the same poem. Mehrotra's translation reflects this fluidity. As he clarifies,

I should also say that I translated the poems in the same spirit in which they were written or, more accurately, sung and transmitted through the centuries. If the Kabir singer, for whatever reason, did not like a particular line he modified it, or replaced it with another, or dropped it altogether. Which is why many Kabir poems come in several versions.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, such an approach blurs the lines between original composition and its subsequent transmission and translation, dismantling notions of authorship and originality. In the bhakti tradition, Zecchini notes, the concept of a singular author or original text is destabilised, since '[t]he inclusive, moving *bhakti* tradition weaves together a chain of memories, a chain of words, a chain of poets, and a socio-textual community whose repertoire cannot be linked to a singular author or to an original Ur-text'.<sup>16</sup> Bhakti poems often emerge from a collective tradition rather than an individual voice, and translation deepens the ambiguity between the translator's voice and that of the original poets. Zecchini observes that in Kolatkar's translations of bhakti figures, 'it is often impossible to distinguish the original versions in Marathi or in English from their translations'.<sup>17</sup> This fluidity reflects the malleable nature of the bhakti tradition, where poets and translators participate in an ongoing act of creation and recreation. Kolatkar, as I will later elaborate, pushes this fluidity further, asserting his right to

---

<sup>15</sup> Mehrotra interviewed by Bharat Iyer.

<sup>16</sup> Zecchini, 'Contemporary Bhakti Recastings', p. 264.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

appropriate and reinterpret Tukaram's works to the extent of creating 'such confusion | that nobody can be sure about what you wrote and what I did'.<sup>18</sup>

Kolatkar's approach is one of creative appropriation, where translation does not merely reproduce but overtakes the original text, transforming it into a new version. Yet, as Kolatkar himself observes, this practice is neither unique nor unusual; it is part of a long-standing tradition among bhakti poets. He thus declares that he follows in the footsteps of Tukaram, who similarly overtook and reworked the legacy of the thirteenth-century bhakti poet Namdeo, stating, 'I can trace the ownership of some of his stuff | to Namdeo'.<sup>19</sup> The bhakti tradition encourages this openness to reinterpretation, allowing poets and translators to freely engage with the work of their predecessors. Dilip Chitre echoes this notion, declaring, "My translations of Tukaram are as much a part of my life as a poet as my own personal work".<sup>20</sup> Here, Chitre not only acknowledges his creative agency in the act of translation but also suggests that the boundary between the translator's voice and the original poet's is porous, reinforcing the bhakti tendency to transcend fixed notions of authorship.

In choosing *Jejuri* as the primary text for my analysis, I argue that it accomplishes a more profound reworking of the bhakti tradition than that achieved by translation. Translation has indeed made bhakti poetry accessible and alive in English. It has also blurred, as Zecchini highlights, 'the frontiers between what is 'native' and 'alien', 'modern' and 'traditional', 'regional' and 'cosmopolitan'.<sup>21</sup> Translating bhakti compositions into contemporary idioms, using colloquial, American English as Mehrotra does, reworks, reinterprets, and recontextualises them for modern readers, perhaps in ways that resonate with contemporary

---

<sup>18</sup> Arun Kolatkar, *Collected Poems in English*, ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Tarsit, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2010), p. 353.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> qtd in Zecchini, 'Contemporary Bhakti Recastings', p. 265.

<sup>21</sup> Zecchini, p. 274

issues and sensibilities. *Jejuri*, on the other hand, bypasses the intermediary act of translation and directly employs the bhakti as a tool for modern critique. It demonstrates how bhakti offers poets a living, evolving resource that extends beyond its historical and cultural context. Translating bhakti texts according to the contexts, biases, or agendas of the translator contributes to the fluidity of authorship characteristic of Indian literary traditions, where works often evolve through collaborative creation and retelling. By contrast, *Jejuri* neither references a specific source text nor clearly acknowledges the influences of other artists. The implications of such a blur in the boundaries of authorship and originality are not ethically concerning because, as Sudhir Chandra notes, ‘Indians had for centuries drawn upon the works of other writers’; it is a norm that any existing work ‘was meant to be available for others to retell it the way they liked, and claim the retelling as their own independent work’.<sup>22</sup> However, Kolatkar’s engagement with the local materials of the bhakti tradition bears upon issues of reading and reception, particularly in relation to nativist critiques. If, as Zecchini contends, ‘[c]ontemporary translations of Kolatkar, Mehrotra or Chitre, by recovering the transgressive, irreverent and demotic voice of bhakti, precisely resist [...] purgative nativist endeavours and ideological appropriations’,<sup>23</sup> *Jejuri* goes further by challenging nativist ideologies that seek to homogenise Indian culture, as it uses English – a language often seen as foreign and colonial. To certain nativist readers, as I will detail in the critical reception section, this use of English is critiqued as alienating.<sup>24</sup> In my argument, Kolatkar’s reworking

---

<sup>22</sup> Sudhir Chandra, ‘Translations and the Making of Colonial Indian Consciousness’, *Pratilipi*, 13 (2008), <<https://pratilipi.in/2008/12/translations-and-the-making-of-colonial-indian-consciousness-sudhir-chandra/>> [accessed 11 September 2024].

<sup>23</sup> Zecchini, p. 271.

<sup>24</sup> This tension is well illustrated in Mehrotra’s introduction to *A History of Indian Literature in English*, where he discusses Vilas Sarang’s reflections on the criticism faced by Indian authors writing in English, who are often perceived as alienated from their mother tongue and cultural heritage. Sarang criticises the rise of nativism in the Marathi literary scene, noting how some Marathi readers view his English writing as inauthentic and disconnected from its linguistic roots. He argues that bilingualism can place Indian writers in a ‘tricky situation’, subjecting them to criticism for lacking authenticity in both languages. This tension occurred in larger post-

of bhakti themes and styles in a global language like English facilitates the production of poetry that, while drawing from a local tradition, resonates within a broader, contemporary context.

In this introduction, I noted that many Indian poets have participated in a collective effort to rework the bhakti tradition through translation. *Jejuri* engages with this effort on a more nuanced level as a personally authored poem. Because *Jejuri* offers a subtler reworking than translation, this effort may be easily overlooked by nativist readers; it can also be obscured by the conventional hybridity model which may misread or efface the significance of local materials. This explains the close focus on *Jejuri* as an example of reworking local materials in this chapter. As I move forward in my analysis, I will situate *Jejuri* within the local context of brahmanical Hinduism and the counter-narrative of bhakti. Indeed, it is difficult to write a concise, foregrounding account of such a long and complex period of history because while one works in a fog in which the ancient history of India disappears, its recent history is extensive and floodlit. Therefore, I will delineate key moments in the formation of Hinduism as a bounded cultural entity, which contrasts with Kolatkar's vision of an inclusive, undogmatic India. I will then examine key aspects of the bhakti movement – its spiritual characteristics, cultural and social impact, and literary dimensions – to clarify its distinctions from brahmanism and its enduring relevance in post-independence India. Additionally, I will discuss Kolatkar's reflections on his brahman lineage and his relationship with the bhakti tradition, alongside an exploration of its resonance in *Jejuri*. Understanding this context is crucial for grasping how Kolatkar's poetry subverts and critiques the dominant brahmanical tradition and the potential misunderstandings that may arise if readers are not familiar with

---

independence Indian literary circles, where prominent nativist figures like Bhalchandra Nemade accused writers like Sarang, Chitre, Mehrotra, and Kolatkar of being 'slaves of Western culture'. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (ed.), *A History of Indian Literature in English* (London: Hurst, 2003), pp. 22-23.

this context. In a critical reception section, then, I will examine how *Jejuri*'s meaning can be misconstrued without a thorough contextual understanding that clarifies the type of Hinduism it escapes, the alternative it presents, and to what purposes. I will finally delve into the poems, highlighting a less-studied aspect of Kolatkar's work: the blending of bhakti themes that critique commodified, ritualistic temple worship to inspire direct devotion with techniques commonly found in modern English poetry. These include shifts in narrative point of view, non-linear structures, and use of varied imagery and references. I argue that these features combined produce an inclusive representation of India and Hinduism, challenging conventional national narratives and power structures. By examining *Jejuri*'s affinity with the bhakti tradition and interaction with other influences, this chapter will develop a deeper understanding of the collection's complexity and its significance in transforming the boundaries of culture, language, and literary traditions.

### **Cultural extremism in newly independent India**

#### Brahmanism from Vedic culture to Hindu nationalism

During Kolatkar's lifetime, newly independent India was marked by cultural extremism, typified by Hindu nationalist efforts to establish a unified and sovereign identity by simplifying the spiritual diversity of the subcontinent into a radical one-ness expressed through the vantage point of brahmans. Notably, the emphasis on a single Hindu essence to identify the Indian subcontinent was only made in recent history; G. P. Deshpande remarks that it is doubtful that the people of India referred to themselves as Hindus before the colonial phase.<sup>25</sup> Still, the roots of the brahmanical interpretation and practice of Hinduism can be

---

<sup>25</sup> G. P. Deshpande, 'The Plural Tradition', cited in T. B. Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 65.

traced back to the Vedas, the poems of the Indo-European Aryans, whose incursions into the subcontinent began around 1500 BC.<sup>26</sup> Initially, this form of belief gained widespread social and political authority after violent conflicts with religions such as Buddhism and Jainism. When the Aryans, who are said to have come from Central Asia, entered India, they encountered an indigenous population, whom they ended up defeating in warfare, leading to the imposition of the Vedic culture and religion, thereby superseding the traditions of the local tribes.<sup>27</sup> Over time, particularly with the advent of the British in the seventeenth century, more systematic efforts were made to consolidate a common denominator for native Indian cultures. Consequently, the brahmanical high scriptural tradition came to be perceived as correct and authoritative, leading to its dominance over other traditions. As Thomas Hansen observes, '[e]arly scholars and missionaries took a keen interest in establishing the main tenets and core doctrines of the seemingly amorphous admixture of religious practices, images, and myths they encountered in India'.<sup>28</sup> This Western epistemological outlook, Hansen notes, regarded the high scriptural traditions of brahmanism, which had produced the majority of Sanskrit texts, as 'the classical center of the Aryan-Vedic high civilization, sharing a set of fundamental principles and practices regulating social and religious behavior as laid down in the scriptures'.<sup>29</sup> Classical Hinduism eventually took on 'a subcontinental dimension', forming 'a single Hinduism' that presumed a shared Aryan or brahmanical culture, including a common language (Sanskrit), shared sacred texts and geography, shared rituals, codes, practices, and so on.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 65.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Braj Mani underscores that the British, driven by colonial designs and racist ideology, either failed to comprehend or lacked guidance regarding the fact that ‘the sacerdotal literature in Sanskrit represented only the brahmanical world-view’.<sup>31</sup> Echoing scholars like Kosambi, Mani posits that the British actively sought to align with brahmanism, viewing it as a convenient tool for subjugating the native population; this inclination towards brahmanism was exacerbated by the challenge of alienating the aristocratic-priestly class, which was crucial for the British survival in India.<sup>32</sup> The convergence between the coloniser and the native elites found further support in the ‘discovery of a common Indo-European heritage with the concomitant Aryan race theory’, established at the onset of colonial rule, serving as a hegemonic ideology that provided the British with a powerful vehicle to reach out to the Hindu elite and vice versa.<sup>33</sup> Thus, despite the initial absence of a coherent tradition in the subcontinent, brahmanical Hinduism was gradually taken to represent a unified Hinduism, facilitated by the contributions of western-educated brahmans, who, according to Hansen, ‘became the key informants in comprehensive mappings and registrations of religious practices and communities’.<sup>34</sup> For these brahmans, ‘the keen interest of the colonial power in religious practices provided an opportunity to codify and rigidify existing social and ritual hierarchies, and to consolidate their social position as arbiters of truth’.<sup>35</sup> With the rise of Hindu nationalist movements, the rhetoric of Hindu unity became more prominent. Most factions within the nationalist movement, irrespective of whether they have a secular or religious framework, believed that such a Hinduism ‘provided India with a distinct character

---

<sup>31</sup> Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2005), p. 190, <<https://archive.org/details/debrahmanisinghi0000braj>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Hansen, p. 66.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

in the world', thereby constituting the solution to the final realisation of nationhood.<sup>36</sup> Despite divergences in agendas, temporal contexts, and leadership, proponents of Hindu nationalism, had a common desire to transform India into what Hansen calls 'a sovereign, disciplined national culture rooted in what is claimed to be a superior ancient Hindu past, and to impose a corporatist and disciplined social and political organization upon society'.<sup>37</sup> For them, 'the Indian nation can only be reinvigorated when its rightful proprietors, the Hindu majority, resurrect a strong sense of Hindutva (Hinduness)'.<sup>38</sup> This robust sense of Hindutva found expression in 'the Vedic ideals and worldview of the Indo-Aryan race', which nationalist figures like Nehru emphasised and enshrined in religious and social aspects of national life; these 'remained practically unchecked and unmodified' despite the successive waves of invasion and conquest, creating 'a continuity between the most modern and the most ancient phases of Hindu thought'.<sup>39</sup> The nationalist majoritarian call for Hindutva, nonetheless, often adopted what Hansen describes as 'paternalist and xenophobic discourses', leading to the formation of a Hindu identity that is based on a specific, exclusive, and discriminatory version of Hinduism that excludes other Hindu and non-Hindu minority groups.<sup>40</sup>

Brahmanical Hinduism, which has historically been prevalent in India but evolved into a national concept in modern politics, emphasises 'the identification of orthodoxy with acceptance of the authority of the Vedas and the Brahmins and the idea of *varnashrama dharma* – the fourfold system of castes and stages of life – as the ideal social structure'.<sup>41</sup> Brahmanism also values the performance of rituals aimed at achieving both worldly and spiritual goals, reinforcing a belief in a hierarchical caste system with brahmans at the apex of

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Mani, p. 31.

<sup>40</sup> Hansen, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Omvedt, p. 2.

society.<sup>42</sup> In the classical sense, as Mani contends, the Hindu caste system is ‘a form of social stratification in which castes are hierarchised, occupationally specialised and separated’ based on purity and pollution rules in aspects like worship, marriage, physical contact, and food.<sup>43</sup> Originating from religious texts, notably the Vedas and the Purush Sukta hymn of the Rigveda, this caste system categorises individuals into a quadripartite arrangement, with brahmans (priests) at the pinnacle, followed in descending order by kshatriyas (rulers, warriors), vaisyas (agriculturalists, pastoralists, merchants), and shudras (servants of the other classes).<sup>44</sup> In Vedic lore, ‘the term brahma(n) signifies the sacred word’ encompassing ‘hymns, prayers, and formulations of truth’, while the title ‘brahman’ is accorded to individuals of a particular caste who are deemed to embody the qualities suggested by this sacred word.<sup>45</sup> According to Manu, the ancient law-giver of the brahmanical tradition, “[a] brahman is a great god, whether he is learned or imbecile’, deserving respect in every circumstance, even if indulging ‘in crime’.<sup>46</sup> In *Classifying the Universe*, Brian K. Smith further explains that brahmans are defined mainly by their reputation as being the first class created by the creator god, by their Vedic knowledge, and by their mastery and control over rituals.<sup>47</sup> Those characteristics, according to Smith, have justified the class’s social position: since they are prior to others, they are dominant, and as a result of their superior knowledge

---

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Burrow, ‘The Early Aryans’, in *Cultural History of India*, ed. by A.L. Basham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 20–30.

<sup>43</sup> Mani, p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), p. 48. The Purushu Sukta, found in the 10th Mandala of the Rigveda, describes the creation of the castes through a grand sacrifice performed by the gods (Jayarama). According to this cosmogonic myth, the primal man, Purush, sacrificed himself to create human society and the different parts of his body created the four different varnas. The brahmans were created from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet. The hierarchy of the varnas is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which they were created. For example, brahmans, who were created from the head of Purush, are considered the most intelligent and powerful varna due to their wisdom and education and are thought to be a representation of the brain. Similarly, the Kshatriyas, the warrior caste, were created by the arms, which represent strength.

<sup>45</sup> Mani, p. 55.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, p. 48.

and the fact that only they possess the ultimate sacrificial techniques, ‘they claim to stand outside of the power relations that govern social life for others’.<sup>48</sup> Conversely, the antithesis of the brahman is the shudra, labelled as ‘the most impure’, ‘born in sin’, and consequently deprived of ‘knowledge, wealth, and human dignity’.<sup>49</sup> According to Mani’s interpretation of Manu, the primary role prescribed for shudras is to willingly embrace the status of slaves, ever ready to be manipulated and exploited without protest ‘so that in the next life they may get a lift up in the caste ladder’.<sup>50</sup>

Casteism is generally believed to have been first implemented by the Aryans as a means of controlling the local population. Even though this or other forms of differentiation exist in all human societies, this model of society, as many anthropologists have observed, is a Hindu phenomenon: it is peculiar to Hinduism and connected to the Hindu faith. As Célestin Bouglé explains in his classic study of Indian social systems, ‘nowhere in the world such clear oppositions between the elementary groups; nowhere is hereditary specializations more strict, nor hierarchy more respected’.<sup>51</sup> Caste, he notes, ‘finds its fullest expression’ in India through the interrelation of three organising principles: ‘hierarchy, hereditary specialization, and repulsion (or separation)’.<sup>52</sup> Anthropologist Louis Dumont similarly emphasises that the caste system in India is a form of hierarchical opposition that is fundamentally different from the Western concept of social inequality or class stratification.<sup>53</sup> He adds that the caste system is based on the principle of graded inequality, in which individuals are ranked and thus

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Mani, p. 55.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Célestin Charles Alfred Bouglé, *Essays on the Caste System*, trans. by and David Francis Pocock (Cambridge: University Press, 1971). p. 53, <<https://archive.org/details/essaysoncastesys0000boug>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>53</sup> Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus; The Caste System and its Implications*, trans. by Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont, and Baisia Gulati (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 27, <<https://archive.org/details/homohierarchicus00dumorich>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

separated not just based on occupational restriction and endogamy, but also most fundamentally according to their relative purity or pollution, which creates more restrictions on eating together and physical contact. ‘This opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure’; according to him, it ‘underlies separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be kept separate’.<sup>54</sup> More recently, Sebastian Velassery has echoed early European Indologists by describing India as a society that has long been ‘divided into a large number of hereditarily specialized groups, which are hierarchically superposed and mutually opposed; it does not tolerate the principle of rising in the status of groups’ mixture and of changing occupation’.<sup>55</sup>

While it can be argued that the caste system is not static or unchanging, but rather is constantly evolving and adapting to changing social, political, and economic conditions, Mani helpfully suggests that brahmanism/casteism presents an ‘archetypal expression’ of how ideology can be used as ‘an instrument of domination’.<sup>56</sup> Throughout history, the brahman community remained generally superior and powerful because of their strategic use of religious and spiritual authority to consolidate power and influence. In the course of time, they used their knowledge and power not only to maintain the caste system but also to form alliances with ruling dynasties, as kings and emperors supported the brahmans and their interpretation of Hinduism in exchange for religious legitimisation. In recent centuries, for instance, their role as temple priests and expertise in rituals allowed them to exert power in hostile situations, and ‘in circumstances where the support of the ruling classes was not

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>55</sup> Sebastian Velassery, *Casteism and Human Rights: Toward an Ontology of the Social Order*, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Mani, p. 15.

guaranteed or worse'.<sup>57</sup> This was especially useful during times when brahmanism had to establish its value to ruling classes who were not familiar with Vedic rituals. For example, in the 1857 Mutiny/Uprising, the last Mughal emperor, Zafar, paid brahmans to pray for victory.<sup>58</sup> Even at times when the brahman way of life was in danger, such as during the invasion of Alexander, brahmans managed to expand their sphere of influence by travelling eastward, away from the western regions.<sup>59</sup> Over time, brahmans expanded their influence to a larger geographical area.<sup>60</sup> This led to the hegemony of brahmanical ideas in society at large, including the application of brahmanical standards of purity, the incorporation of brahmanical ritual practices among non-brahmans, the use of brahmanical ideas as a template for society, and the adoption of brahmanical claims to royal protection as guides for governance.<sup>61</sup>

### Bhakti movement: response to brahmanism and relevance in modern India

A series of medieval socio-religious movements known as the bhakti movement emerged as a 'spectacular and pan-Indian site of lower caste creativity and resistance' to the enduring hegemony of brahmanical ideology, imposed through caste-oriented regulations, occupational hierarchies, and cultural practices.<sup>62</sup> Reaching its zenith in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the north, this movement, led by a remarkable line of subaltern saint-poets like Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu, and Nanak, unfolded a long journey starting around 500 AD from the deep south, gradually reaching Karnataka and Maharashtra, and finally engulfing north India

---

<sup>57</sup> Velassery, p. 188.

<sup>58</sup> William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 267.

<sup>59</sup> Johannes Bronkhorst, *How the Brahmins Won: From Alexander to the Guptas*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 182.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> Mani, p. 42.

and Bengal.<sup>63</sup> Despite differences among the proponents of bhakti movements, which were caused by varying circumstances of time, place, changed socio-political atmosphere and individual religious and cultural sensibilities, a common thread that brought them together was their shared opposition to caste hierarchy, brahmanical authority, and religious formalism.<sup>64</sup> This unity allows us to view the bhakti as forming a cohesive movement, despite its diversity of expression and lack of formal organisation. The bhakti movement is united in its emphasis on personal experience in spirituality and its critique of the strict ritualism characteristic of brahman-supervised Hindu worship and the caste conceits that accompany it. This movement signifies a cultural revolt that not only left an indelible mark on India's spiritual and socio-cultural contexts but also its literary landscape, showcasing 'scintillating examples of toiling caste creativity'.<sup>65</sup>

Spiritually, the bhakti movement introduced a form of devotion that was deeply personal and direct, distinguishing itself from the priest-sanctioned, ritualistic approach of mainstream Hinduism. This form of devotion is not self-centred or egocentric but is cultivated through the inner world of the individual. Andrew Schelling, in his *Oxford Anthology of Bhakti Literature*, encapsulates this essence, contending that '[a]t the root of bhakti coils the formidable hunger for human freedom, a sense of the world's inexplicable mystery, and the conviction that each of us forms some personal relationship to that mystery'.<sup>66</sup> What mattered for the bhaktas, thus, was not what is remembered, passed, and received, but what is experienced in the here and now. It is no surprise, then, as Karen Prentiss points out, that this approach to the divine was perceived by many missionaries and orientalists in the nineteenth

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Andrew Schelling, *The Oxford Anthology of Bhakti Literature*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. xvi.

century as ‘an Indian version of Protestant Christianity’, with Chaitanya likened to Luther for playing a similar reforming role.<sup>67</sup> Laetitia Zecchini further underscores the undogmatic nature of bhakti, highlighting that its tendency to capture the sacred ‘in humble and peripheral spaces’ rather than in ‘allotted spaces’ blurred the line between the metaphysical and the everyday.<sup>68</sup> This integration of the immanent and transcendent is a characteristic of the ‘horizontal cosmology’ of popular devotion, where the deity ‘is directly accessible to his followers, exists on earth, here and now’.<sup>69</sup>

The bhakti movement, as the very use of the word ‘movement’ suggests, was not merely a devotional approach but an alternative historical genealogy that laid the foundation for the modern Indian nation. In addition to providing a different, non-ritualistic route to the divine, the bhakti movement also played a role in reconfiguring society on more equitable lines.

Venkataraman Raghavan characterises bhakti as a ‘democratic doctrine’ that united diverse communities and genders, playing a crucial role in India’s territorial integration.<sup>70</sup> Beyond its religious dimension, characterised by emotionalism, unorthodoxy, active participation, and embodiment in the everyday world, bhakti exerts a significant social influence. This social impact unfolded because, despite forming a heterogenous community of worshipers, the bhakti saint-poets were ‘drawn from the old, excluded orders of India’s political or social hierarchies, and their songs and subversive beliefs caused upheaval in families and entire clans’.<sup>71</sup> Contrary to brahmanical orthodoxy, the bhakti movement, as Prentiss argues, adopts a ‘heterodox’ stance by protesting ‘forms and ceremonies and class distinctions based on

---

<sup>67</sup> Karen Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3, <<https://archive.org/details/embodimentofbhak0000pech>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>68</sup> Zecchini, ‘Contemporary Bhakti Recastings’, p. 268.

<sup>69</sup> Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer, *King of Hunters, Warriors, and Shepherds: Essays on Kandhoba, Ann Feldhaus, Aditya Malik and Heidrun Bruckner*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1997), p. 87.

<sup>70</sup> Venkataraman Raghavan, *The Great Integrators: The Saint-Singers of India* (New Delhi: Publications Div., Government of India, 1966), p. 32.

<sup>71</sup> Schelling, p. xiv.

birth'.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, central to its social aspect is the fact that this religious revival was primarily the work of the masses: at its head were saint-poets, 'who sprang chiefly from the lower orders of society – tailors, carpenters, potters, gardeners, shop-keepers, barbers, and even mahars – more often than Brahmans'.<sup>73</sup> The lowly origins of popular bhakti practitioners, as suggested by Mani, constitute a notable feature of the bhakti movement, which also saw the active involvement of numerous influential women.<sup>74</sup> Yet, even if they were not of lower caste lineages, bhakti mystics of all ages have chosen a conscious subalternity by declining the privileges which were considered barriers to spiritual liberation; their songs were distinguished by their non-sectarian attitude, vernacular idiom, dismissal of rituals and caste, class, and gender, and affinity with the underprivileged.<sup>75</sup>

As a socio-religious reform movement that used literature as a primary mode of expression, the bhaktas' rejection of religious formality extended to their approach to poetry. As A. K. Ramanujan highlights, bhakti saint-poets addressed their gods in the most informal tone, liberating poetry from the hegemony of the stylised metrical forms used by elite priesthood and subverting the 'great' traditions in which 'the gods of mythology do not sweat, smell or sneeze'.<sup>76</sup> Andrew Schelling further notes that bhakti poems and hymns were 'strikingly modern' in their 'imagery, rhythm, and idiom', showcasing 'a thrust towards distinctively personal voices that often articulate the experiences and struggles of the poets'.<sup>77</sup> This modern sensibility in bhakti poetry, reinforced by the use of paradoxes and double meanings, allowed devotees to convey their inner conflicts and emotional inconsistencies rather than focusing on

---

<sup>72</sup> Prentiss, p. 25.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Mani, p. 35.

<sup>75</sup> Schelling, p. xiv.

<sup>76</sup> A. K. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 31.

<sup>77</sup> Schelling, p. xvii

abstract metaphysical claims.<sup>78</sup> Here, it is important to recognise that while the bhaktas were prolific creators of devotional poetry, songs, and hymns that conveyed their spiritual and social ideals, I believe that they should not be seen as literary figures – artists or poets – in the conventional sense. This is because their compositions operate within a different paradigm from conventional literary concepts of fixed, text-based works. As discussed in the introduction with reference to Mehrotra’s approach to translating Kabir, these works were oral and fluid, existing in multiple versions with variations as they were passed down by performers. I would also add that characterising the bhaktas as literary figures could overshadow their primary devotional purpose and reformative impact by shifting the emphasis to literary artistry and acclaim. Therefore, I refer to them as ‘saint-poets’ to emphasise their dual role as spiritual figures and creators of literary works, highlighting that their poetry was an extension of their spiritual experience and mission.<sup>79</sup> My intention in discussing the literary aspects of bhakti is not to subject their compositions to literary evaluation but to illuminate their central themes and contextual significance, particularly in relation to Kolatkar. I will come to a fuller discussion of the thematic connection between *Jejuri* and the compositions of bhakti figures like Tukaram in a sub-section following my examination of Kolatkar’s perspective on reclaiming the bhakti tradition and, more broadly, Hindu traditions. I position this section after Kolatkar’s personal reflections and before the critical reception section to contextualise *Jejuri* within a broader discussion on Kolatkar and the bhakti, while also foregrounding my re-examination of how the collection has been previously interpreted,

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. xviii.

<sup>79</sup> In his *Songs of Kabir*, Mehrotra, drawing from Ramanujan, uses the term ‘saint-poets’ to refer to bhakti figures, though he emphasises a different aspect. While I distinguish between bhaktas and conventional literary figures, stressing the fluid and adaptable nature of bhakti compositions, Ramanujan and, by extension, Mehrotra, suggest that with bhakti, the poet becomes “a person who flouts proprieties, refuses the education of a poet, insists that anyone can be a poet – for it is the Lord who sings through one” (xxi). Both usages, nonetheless, reflect the dual nature of such individuals: they are spiritual (saints) and express their devotion through poetry (poets).

facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between Kolatkar's artistic vision and the scholarly interpretations of his work.

Another point to consider in relation to the bhakti literary aspects is their linguistic choices. A major consequence of the bhakti saint-poets' preference for direct and personal devotion over caste-based, ritualistic spiritual practices was their use of vernacular, regional languages instead of the sacred, elitist Sanskrit. Sheldon Pollock situates this linguistic shift within a broader cultural process in South Asian literary history, where vernacular literatures gained literary status by transposing 'the cosmopolitan style and aesthetic of Sanskrit' into regional contexts.<sup>80</sup> This adaptation process involves incorporating elements such as lexicon, figures of speech, and narratives – often drawn from Sanskrit epics – so that 'the vernaculars became literary by being local habitations of translocal literariness'.<sup>81</sup> Pollock terms this process 'superposition', which refers to the adaptation and integration of styles and aesthetics from classical languages like Sanskrit into regional vernaculars, thereby endowing these local languages with literary status.<sup>82</sup> 'Superposition' involves two key processes: 'literization', the act of transcribing a previously oral language into written form, and 'literarization', the transformation of a language from a 'documentary' medium into a literary one – imbued with 'expressive', 'imaginative' qualities.<sup>83</sup> These two processes, according to Pollock, 'are by no means coterminous': while literization is a prerequisite for literarization, it does not guarantee

---

<sup>80</sup> Sheldon Pollock, 'Indian', in *How Literatures Begin*, p. 89. This discussion on the relationship between the South Asian vernacular and Sanskrit has its root in Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). This book examines the evolution and eventual decline of Sanskrit as a dominant language in the realms of poetry and politics. In the opening paragraph of his introduction, Pollock articulates this historical trajectory, noting that around the beginning of the Common Era, Sanskrit transitioned from being a sacred language to becoming a medium for literary and political expression, spreading its influence into a vast cultural and conceptual network from Afghanistan to Java (1). However, by the beginning of the second millennium CE, regional languages began to challenge and gradually replace Sanskrit in both literary and political contexts, marking a significant shift in South Asian cultural history (*ibid*).

<sup>81</sup> Pollock, 'Indian', p. 89.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

it; a language can be transcribed without becoming a literary medium, and literarization does not always follow from literization.<sup>84</sup> ‘Superposition’ occurs when the vernacular language undergoes both ‘literization’ and ‘literarization’, emerging not only as a written medium but also as a literary one in its own right, thereby achieving a level of cultural and literary authority previously reserved for Sanskrit – albeit not completely independent from it.

Pollock, however, recognises the limitations of his model in encapsulating the entirety of premodern South Asian literary dynamics. In particular, he acknowledges that the elevated use of the ‘cosmopolitan vernacular’ in the early stages of regional literatures ‘was contested, or rather rejected, by insurgent religious groups’ from the twelfth century onward, leading to what Pollock designates as a ‘secondary vernacular revolution’ against ‘the dominance of the Sanskrit cultural and social order’.<sup>85</sup> This rejection of Sanskrit was driven by its role in upholding social hierarchies, including caste and untouchability.<sup>86</sup> Within this context, the bhakti movement, exemplified by figures such as Kabir, played a crucial role. Pollock highlights Kabir’s effort to bring a ‘demotic, uncourtly, or even anticourtly, element, in both form and content, into the literary bloodstream’, moving away from the Sanskritic norms of ‘quantitative versification, derivative vocabulary, and pan-Indic divinity’.<sup>87</sup> Instead, Kabir embraced ‘moraic (or other types of ‘folk’) meters, regional lexemes, and highly localized forms of religious expression’.<sup>88</sup> By composing in regional languages like Marathi, Hindi, and

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. Here, I should note that while Pollock’s framework examines the written and oral in terms of how they contribute to the literary status of languages, he does not reduce these to a simple binary of ‘literary’ versus ‘non-literary’; nor does he suggest that orality in South Asian literary culture is insignificant. Rather, his analysis explores how some vernacular languages achieved literary recognition in contexts dominated by Sanskrit. Pollock also emphasises, in *The Language of the Gods*, the persistent role of orality in South Asian literary culture, including Sanskritic traditions, noting that oral performance has remained central to the dissemination and experience of literary works even after the widespread adoption of writing, as evidenced by practices such as memorisation and recitation (pp. 85-86).

<sup>85</sup> Pollock, ‘Indian’, in *How Literatures Begin*, p. 90.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Tamil, bhakti saint-poets made their spiritual messages more accessible, thereby effecting what Ahmad Ajaz describes as an ‘enormous democratization of literary language’.<sup>89</sup> Zecchini observes that this democratization was ‘particularly appealing to contemporary poets’ such as Kolatkar, who believed that the bhakti saint-poets’ rejection of ‘Sanskrit’, in favour of producing ‘spontaneous “free-verse” poetry in the vernacular’ with ‘meters closer to speech forms’, provided them with ‘the creative tools’ and ‘voice’ that have shaped ‘the language in which they write today’.<sup>90</sup>

### **Kolatkar: a bhakti voice in post-independence India**

#### Kolatkar’s approach to tradition

In a unique interview with Eunice De Souza, Kolatkar painted a picture of a poet who values the fluidity and inclusivity of Hindu traditions, rejects rigid identity constructs, and prioritises relevance and awareness of global issues in his creative process. When asked about whether he feels an advantage stemming from his brahman Hindu background compared to poets categorised as outsiders, minorities, or alienated, Kolatkar expressed an aversion to such nativist homogenising sensibilities. He posited that the term ‘Hinduism’ itself is elusive, ‘hard to define’, because ‘there are so many traditions within it and so many contradictions’.<sup>91</sup>

Additionally, he contended that Hinduism’s ‘amorphous’ nature accommodates ‘everything including atheism’; ‘if it has room for all this, it has room for every other tradition’.<sup>92</sup> This expansive outlook applies to his sense of Indianness, where he dismisses the notion of an

---

<sup>89</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, *Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 273.

<sup>90</sup> Zecchini, ‘Contemporary Bhakti Recastings’, p. 258.

<sup>91</sup> Kolatkar in Eunice De Souza, *Talking Poems: Conversations with Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 22.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

‘abstract model to which one should conform’.<sup>93</sup> Kolatkar perceives Indianness as an ‘evolving concept’; ‘[w]hat makes you Indian should really take care of itself’, he declared. In doing so, he underscores a belief in an organic and progressive development of identity rather than adherence to strict definitions or expectations of national identity.<sup>94</sup> Expressing his indifference to being recognised as an ‘Indian poet’, Kolatkar prioritised the creation of ‘a good poem’ as a contribution ‘to his country’.<sup>95</sup> To achieve this, he advocates for a liberal, selective use of tradition, urging the integration of its elements ‘to the extent you find it relevant to the world about you’.<sup>96</sup> Kolatkar’s kind of localism is in line with the theoretical underpinnings of my thesis. He did not propose a version of cultural purity nor, for instance, racial essentialism. Instead, he embraced borrowing, fusions, and plurality as enabling and culturally authentic, so long as the literary product was a good poem and effectively expressed a distinctive experience.

Tradition, in Kolatkar’s perspective, is not only the brahmanical version of Hinduism associated with his brahman lineage; nor is it just the bhakti tradition that stands in opposition to brahmanism. Instead, he made the unequivocal proclamation ‘I want to reclaim everything I consider my tradition’.<sup>97</sup> This includes the bhakti tradition, which is evident not only in the content, perspective, and expressive patterns observed even from a cursory look at *Jejuri* but also in his personal experience. In response to De Souza’s question about his fascination with the bhakti cult, Kolatkar emphasised his admiration for their poetry; his pilgrimage to Pandharpur further underscores his commitment to bhakti ideals, as he chose not to ‘enter the temple or bribe anyone to help me break the queue’.<sup>98</sup> To Kolatkar, tradition surpasses both

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

brahmanism and bhakti. It encompasses ‘history of all kinds, the beginning of man, archaeology, histories of everything from religion to objects [...] the evolution of man’s knowledge of things [...] the history of man’s trying to make sense of the universe and his place in it which may take me to Sumerian’.<sup>99</sup> This cosmopolitan mindset to defining one’s tradition is complemented by a multi-perspectival and an inquisitive understanding of history. History, as Kolatkar perceives it, is not sequential but ‘ambiguous’, ‘fluid’, a ‘floating situation’, characterised by multiple versions with no final certainties.<sup>100</sup>

This open-mindedness towards tradition and history is indicative of Kolatkar’s approach to reclaiming the bhakti tradition. His revival of it is not a restoration in the nativist fashion, but an effort to contemporise and fuse it with other elements he deemed integral to his cultural history. At the core of this contemporising endeavour was his ambition, as expressed in his address of Tukaram in sequence fourteen of ‘Making Love to a Poem’, ‘to pass off [my poems] as yours’.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, if we lack tangible proof of Kolatkar’s assimilation of Tukaram in *Jejuri* or any other work, it is because he deliberately sought to sow confusion between his work and that of Tukaram, aiming to erase the lines of authorship: ‘I’ll create such confusion | that nobody can be sure about what you wrote and what I did’.<sup>102</sup> In sequence sixteen, he further declares:

I say

I’m his legal heir

[...]

everything he wrote

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Kolatkar, *Collected Poems*, p. 353.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

is mine by right

[...]

he certainly won't complain

he dare not

I can trace the ownership of some of his stuff

to Namdeo.<sup>103</sup>

In bhakti literature, this kind of overshadowing of authors' identities is normal practice, as the emphasis is on the message being conveyed, rather than on the individual authors. John Stratton Hawley clarifies this idea, remarking that many famous Indian texts do not reflect the notion of authorship as seen in the West, where the author is considered the creator and owner of their work.<sup>104</sup> Instead, the authors in Indian literature are seen as transmitters of spiritual messages, rather than being credited with creating them. While it is not unusual for Indians to acknowledge authors, Hawley notes that many well-known Indian texts 'betray the sense that an author's job is to transmit something that has been given – to give it again rather than to create and in that act possess it'.<sup>105</sup>

This strategy is not one of preservation in isolation but rather a dynamic engagement that allows for the evolution and adaptation of tradition, while affirming its continued relevance in the contemporary context. Therefore, as one expects from a cosmopolitan poet like Kolatkar, to whom 'poets are really worldwide', his attempt to recover the pre-colonial bhakti tradition was not a reactionary measure to counter foreign literary influences.<sup>106</sup> In fact, at the same

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 353-354.

<sup>104</sup> John Stratton Hawley, 'Author and Authority in the Bhakti Poetry of North India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 47:2 (1988), p. 269, doi:10.2307/2056168.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Kolatkar interviewed by de Souza, p. 24.

time that Kolatkar was influenced by Marathi bhakti poets such as Tukaram, Janabai, Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, and Eknath, he was also informed by a wide range of global influences. These included Western modernist poets like E. E. Cummings, Samuel Beckett, and William Carlos Williams, classical Chinese poets like Wang Wei, Tu Fu, and Han Shan, and Russian writers such as Mandelstam, Dostoevsky, and Gogol.<sup>107</sup> Kolatkar's interests extended beyond literature, encompassing blues musicians like Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, and filmmakers like Andrzej Wajda, Kurosawa, and Truffaut; even comedians like Laurel and Hardy left their mark on his work. This blend of influences does not make the bhakti tradition any less Indian, if we may say so. Rather, it highlights the tradition's capacity to evolve and adapt to meet the tastes and concerns of contemporary readers.

Kolatkar's reclamation of the bhakti tradition is not about returning to a pure, unaltered form of tradition. Instead, he brings the spirit of medieval Indian bhakti saint-poets into a modern context, suggesting that bhakti should not be restricted to India as a spiritual practice, nor should bhakti poets be seen as parochial figures known only to local audiences. Rather, they should be viewed as collaborators, perhaps anticipators of modernist poets, who articulate the spiritual struggles of the modern individual by their repudiation of institutionalised religion and focus on individual spiritual experiences. Kolatkar's statement in his address to Tukaram, 'Like it or not | I'll make you world famous | not you alone but both of us [...] I'm going to teach you | You got to have some English Tuka | if you want to get ahead in the world', highlights his intention to universalise the bhakti tradition by writing a poem like *Jejuri* in English.<sup>108</sup> This choice reflects his desire to create a unique form of cultural expression that is deeply rooted in Indian tradition, yet adaptable to new contexts and open to global influences.

---

<sup>107</sup> The full list of artists appears of artists appears in A. K. Mehrotra, 'Death of a Poet' in *Arun Kolatkar: Collected Poems in English*, ed. A. K. Mehrotra (Tarsit: Bloodaxe, 2010), p. 14.

<sup>108</sup> Kolatkar, *Collected Poems*, pp. 352-353.

In this sense, *Jejuri* exemplifies how a ‘local element’ can be both reclaimed and reworked in a manner that honours its origins while allowing it to evolve and remain relevant in a contemporary, globalised world.

Thus, instead of recreating a medieval version of bhakti, Kolatkar identifies its remarkable similarities with Euro-American modernism and puts them into dialogue through English. Both bhakti poetry and modernist literature reject traditional forms and conventions, instead opting for innovative styles and forms. They both question traditional authorities, whether it be religious or political, and call for a more personal approach to life. Moreover, bhakti poetry and modernism share a similar strategic approach to language. Bhakti poetry often react against the sophisticated language of priests by employing a plain, colloquial style to communicate a direct and personal devotion. Similarly, modernist poets tend to eliminate the traditional formalism and ornate diction of Victorian poetry, striving to get to the core of their message. Nonetheless, both bhakti and modernist poets often layer this perceived simplicity with a technicality that adds a deeper and more intellectual level to their poems. In this instance, bhakti once again takes the lead in capturing the essence of modern self-awareness, with its seemingly uncomplicated expression that conveys the intensities of life experiences within its juxtaposition, paradox, and irony, along with equivocal diction. By putting the bhakti in dialogue with modernist sensibilities, Kolatkar roots his spirituality and creativity in medieval India while also embracing openness to external influences, constructing a broad sense of cultural, historical, and literary belonging.

Indeed, Kolatkar’s possession of, and affinity with, poets of his homeland bring to the metropolis a locally inflected set of energies and preoccupations that create a formative dialogue with several literary traditions, creating what can be called a native modernity. This,

in turn, complicates the long-dominant tendency in the academy to interpret modernism in an allegedly axial perspective that is exclusive to Euro-American modernists, assuming a centre and a periphery.<sup>109</sup> In this context, Vilas Sarang discusses the peripheral position of Indian poets writing in English. He argues that while these poets may be considered “privileged” compared to their counterparts who write in native languages, they are still regarded as “under-privileged” by the English-speaking world, particularly the Anglo-American literary establishment, because they “are not at the Center” of that world.<sup>110</sup> Consequently, both Indian English poets and those writing in native languages share a sense of being on the periphery, distanced from a central, dominant literary culture.<sup>111</sup> This periphery-centre dynamic should, however, motivate us to think about a larger global context in which other non-Western writers can participate creatively by providing models that emphasise the experiences characteristic of modernism. One cannot of course deny the impact of Eliot and other modernists on ‘so-called Third-World poets’ such as Kolatkar, noting – as Ramazani does – that ‘the intercultural poetic forms of modernism, in particular, have been attractive to [these poets] in their quest to break through monologic lyricism, to express their cross-cultural experience’.<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> In addressing this matter, I follow Elleke Boehmer and Steven Matthews who argue that this axial relationship, which assumes a centre and a periphery, should ramify to consider a wider world-scale context that includes the creative participation of ‘other cultural and national players’ who contribute models that intensify ‘those experiences characteristically associated with modernism: “making new”; a sense of historical liminality; the fragmentation of absolutes; interests in subjective and multiple perspectives, and in the fluidity of consciousness’. See Elleke Boehmer and Steven Matthews. ‘Modernism and Colonialism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, edited by Michael Levenson, 2nd ed., (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011), pp. 287-288.

<sup>110</sup> Vilas Sarang, ‘Fullstoppers and Semi-colonials’, *New Quest* 143 (2001), p. 94, qtd in Anjali Nerlekar, *Bombay Modern: Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Literary Culture* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016), p. 15.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Jahan Ramazani, ‘Modernist Bricolage, Postcolonial Hybridity’, in *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 99.

However, Kolatkar's engagement with the bhakti moves beyond the typical model of hybridity. Unlike Ramazani, who might describe Kolatkar's evocation of the modern sensibility of bhakti as a navigation between 'imported Euromodernism and a pristine native culture' to 'post-colonize Euromodernism and Euromodernize the postcolonial',<sup>113</sup> I argue that *Jejuri* is better understood as an effort to contemporise the local bhakti tradition rather than grafting European modernist ideas and forms onto it. What informs Kolatkar's critique of the dominant Vedic brahmanical tradition – often preoccupied with metaphysical ideals and abstractions – is the devotional vision and poetry of bhakti. As Ramanujan points out, the bhakti movement was a powerful tool in the hands of a modern poet like Kolatkar because it was interpreted as subaltern, subversive, and inclusive.<sup>114</sup> In this light, Kolatkar's *Jejuri* can be viewed as a modern continuation of bhakti's critical stance of the brahmanical tradition, which pervaded the India in which Kolatkar lived, as Hindu nationalists sought to consolidate the varied worship practices of the Indian subcontinent into a singular and uniform identity, valorising 'the brahmanical tradition as the shaper and saviour of national unity and harmony', as noted in the *Debrahmanising History* of Braj Mani.<sup>115</sup> Yet, this does not preclude *Jejuri* from serving as a meeting point where Kolatkar represents a bhakti voice relevant to post-independence India while also engaging with Euro-American modernists. His work responds to similar modern challenges from a standpoint rooted in a form of spiritual and social modernity within the Indian context, albeit its recontextualization in the twentieth century and expression in English make it relevant and accessible to a contemporary, global readership.

---

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-108.

<sup>114</sup> A. K Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays*, p. 26.

<sup>115</sup> Mani, p. 21.

### Bhakti resonance in *Jejuri*

The bhakti influence resonates through *Jejuri*, especially through the legacy of the seventeenth-century Marathi saint-poet, Tukaram. As I previously noted, Kolatkar's engagement with Tukaram extended beyond admiration and translation, establishing an intertextual dialogue that revitalises the bhakti tradition within a modern context. Tukaram's bhakti was marked by a deep suspicion of what J. Nelson Fraser and K. B. Marathe term 'false teachers and impostaers'.<sup>116</sup> This suspicion is vividly expressed in his poem 3690, where he denounces a corrupt priest for prioritising personal gain over true spiritual service:

In his greed for gain, he has sold the  
service of God; where is God left in such a one?

Tuka says, The man who loves honour, we will  
cover him with shame.<sup>117</sup>

Tukaram's critique extends beyond spiritual matters to address the societal dynamics of his time, particularly the marginalisation of lower castes by the brahmans. As a shudra, Tukaram challenged the orthodox norms by writing religious poetry in Marathi instead of Sanskrit, a move that, as Schelling points out, 'put him at odds with the orthodox brahmans of his day', who deemed it simply unacceptable for a shudra to voice any opinion on spiritual matters.<sup>118</sup> At the heart of Tukaram's philosophy is the fundamental principle that God transcends caste distinctions, valuing all worshippers equally. Additionally, Tukaram emphasises that true

---

<sup>116</sup> See section XXIII. 'Against False Teachers and Imposters' in Tukaram, *The Poems of Tukārāma: Translated and Re-arranged, with Notes and an Introduction*, by J. Nelson Fraser and K. B. Marathe, Volume 3 (Delhi: The Christian Literature Society, 1915), pp.321-330.

<<https://archive.org/details/poemstukrma00maragoog/page/n11/mode/2up>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>117</sup> Tukaram, Volume 3, p. 322.

<sup>118</sup> Andrew Schelling, *The Oxford Anthology of Bhakti Literature*, p. 90.

devotion, not social status, defines spiritual worth, as reflected in his verses: ‘Our Lord knows nothing of high or lowly birth; | he stops wherever he sees devotion and faith’,<sup>119</sup> and ‘Consider him as a Brahman, vile though his birth may be, who utters correctly the name of Rama’.<sup>120</sup>

In similar vein, and despite being brahman by birth, Kolatkar critiques the caste-structured society of the temple-town Jejuri, reflecting the continued stratification of Indian society in the post-independence period, which, as Braj Mani argues, was perpetuated by nationalist leaders who ‘did not strive to build a casteless, equalitarian ideology’.<sup>121</sup> In *Jejuri*, Kolatkar exposes the corruption, materialism, and incompetence of brahman priests. For instance, the poem ‘The Priest’ portrays the chief priest of the temple as a foul materialist, more concerned with receiving ‘puran poli’ from pilgrims than attending to his religious duties (43). This theme is further explored in ‘The Temple Rat’, where the priest’s greed is symbolised by his satisfaction at receiving gold bangles from a bride, signalled by the ‘trace of a smile’ on his face (61). In ‘A Low Temple’, the priest is revealed as ignorant and indifferent about the true identity of a goddess, asserting that she is the ‘eight arm goddess’ despite the fact that she has ‘eighteen arms’ (47). Kolatkar’s depiction of the priest in ‘The Blue Horse’ highlights the priest’s dishonesty, as he deliberately manipulates a temple mural of Khandoba’s blue horse – the flying steed the deity rode in his renowned confrontation with the demons Mani and Malla. The priest uses ‘a nutcracker’ to fabricate the illusion of blue shadow on what is, in the mural, a white horse (66). I will return to these poems for more detailed close readings, along with the three poems ‘A Song for a Vaghya’, ‘A Song for a Murli’, and ‘An Old Woman’ to

---

<sup>119</sup> Tukaram, *The Poems of Tukārāma: Translated and Re-arranged, with Notes and an Introduction*, by J. Nelson Fraser and K. B. Marathe, Volume 2 (Delhi: The Christian Literature Society, 1913), p. 286, <<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.202538>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>121</sup> Mani, p. 20.

provide a comprehensive account of Kolatkar's critique of brahmanical hegemony over the temple and its far-reaching impact on the lives of servants and inhabitants of lower castes.

Despite his critique of religious institutions, Kolatkar's approach remains reformist rather than revolutionary. Indeed, as Andrew Schelling rightly emphasises, bhakti is a fluid and multifaceted phenomenon: 'if religious orthodoxy takes a few standardized or prescribed forms, then the efforts to break free from it are never standard or predictable'.<sup>122</sup> So, while there are instances of bhaktas adopting radical positions, the tradition also accommodates reformist tendencies, wherein elements of protest coexist with an acceptance of established forms of spirituality.<sup>123</sup> As reformists, bhakti saint-poets may acknowledge the cosmic powers and transcendent overlordship of God, recite Vedic mantras and praises of God, accept idol worship, and even perform puja rituals. Kolatkar's bhakti idiom conveys such a moderate approach of reform. Rather than rejecting idol worship entirely, Kolatkar instead contemplates the delicate line between the divine and the material, pondering, 'What is god | and what is stone | the dividing line | if it exists | is very thin | at Jejuri' (53). This stance is further illustrated in 'The Horseshoe Shrine', where Kolatkar recounts the legend of a sacred stone imprinted with the hoof print of Khandoba's blue horse: 'That nick in the rock | is really a kick in the side of the hill. | It's where a hoof struck' (48). Likewise, in the three poems titled 'Chaitanya', Kolatkar gives voice to the sixteenth-century bhakti reformer Chaitanya, who, during his pilgrimage to Jejuri, communicated intimately with its stone-gods in their own 'stone language' (47). Such moments of recognising the divine as conventionally understood coexist with examples of opposition of religious orthodoxy. In 'Makarand', for instance, the speaker opts to retain a symbolic position outside the temple: 'out in the courtyard | where no

---

<sup>122</sup> Schelling, p. xviii.

<sup>123</sup> Nirguna bhaktas is one example of the revolutionist trend, as discussed by Karen Prentiss, p. 27.

one will mind | if I smoke' (60), while 'A Little Pile of Stones' reveals his sceptical attitude towards the Hindu community's unquestioning adherence to what he considers dogmatic religious practices.

This interplay between structured and unstructured devotion in reformist bhakti has naturally given rise to debates about whether it opposed institutionalised religiosity in the first place. Tukaram exemplifies such controversies, with scholars like J. Fraser questioning the extent of his role as a reformer due to perceived ambiguity and self-contradiction.<sup>124</sup> One area of contention in Tukaram's bhakti discourse that we also find mirrored in Kolatkar's work is his relationship with the prevalent idolatry of his time.<sup>125</sup> On one hand, Tukaram emphasises the worship of the formless divine, urging believers to move beyond mere idolatry: 'If you mean to worship Him then conceive Him as the Universe, | it is vain to limit Him to one spot'.<sup>126</sup> On the other hand, he acknowledges the need for tangible representations of the divine to aid in devotion: 'Give me something visible to pray to, | let someone fulfil my helpless desires'.<sup>127</sup>

This seemingly paradoxical stance is not self-contradictory because, what is ultimately important in devotion, according to Tukaram, is faith: 'the essence of the matter is faith; | it is a matter of experience that stones become gods'.<sup>128</sup> As Prentiss clarifies, for bhakti saints,

---

<sup>124</sup> See chapter VI of J. Nelson Fraser and James F. Edwards, *The Life and Teaching of Tukaram* (Delhi: The Christian Literature Society for India, 1922), <<https://archive.org/details/LifeAndTeachingsOfTukaram>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>125</sup> Another contentious example relevant to my chapter is Tukaram's anti-caste attitude. Despite critiquing inept and materialistic brahman priests as in poems 3549, 3683, 3686, Tukaram acknowledges the priestly position in general. In poem 2621, for instance, he highlights their respected role, stating that 'we should pay reverence to sages and Brahmins; | we should not accept it ourselves'. He elsewhere warns that 'He who never worships holy men, visits no holy spot, he is a dowry of hell' (1066). While the reception of Tukaram is beyond the scope of my chapter, I highlight this issue to assert that, in my interpretation of bhakti as a religious, social, and literary reform in medieval India, I find no contradiction between condemning impious priests and recognising priestly authority. An inviting solution can be seen in poem 3680: 'It is not fit that speech of mine should pollute you, O learned. Bramhanas! ... Practice your duties as they are prescribed in the Vedas. It is your duty to give and mine to receive the food you leave, says Tuka'.

<sup>126</sup> Tukaram, volume 1, p. 224.

<sup>127</sup> Tukaram, volume 2, p. 1153.

<sup>128</sup> Tukaram, volume 2, p. 2605.

spontaneous and unstructured devotion alone can ensure the salvation of the devotee; even when actualised by structured acts, the key to genuine devotion is the active engagement that defines bhakti.<sup>129</sup>

In its reforming capacity, bhakti spirituality is thus recognised as a revival of devotion that had once, but no longer inspired brahmanism.<sup>130</sup> While the established worship of mainstream Hindu religiosity is formalistic and takes place in temples, ‘bhakti represented the possibility of religious experience anywhere, anytime’.<sup>131</sup> Described as a ‘theology of embodiment’ by Prentiss, bhakti is embedded in the ordinary world.<sup>132</sup> In their poetry, thus, bhaktas lean towards the observational, depicting ‘images of everyday life, and their responses to it’.<sup>133</sup> For example, in a hymn translated by Prentiss for Appar, a seventh-century Tamil poet, agricultural labour becomes a metaphor for spiritual development. Peasants are portrayed as ‘Using the plow of truth | sowing the seeds of love | plucking the weeds of falsehood | pouring the water of patience’; these virtuous deeds ultimately lead to the growth of ‘the Bliss of Śiva’.<sup>134</sup> In a similar manner, Kolatkar’s *Jejuri* reveals what Bruce King describes as the ‘divine dynamism’ in the tangible, everyday world.<sup>135</sup> The poet-pilgrim’s journey finds significance in the seemingly trivial event, such as the captivating spectacle ‘of a dozen cocks and hens’ joyfully dancing in a jowar field during harvest: ‘The craziest you’ve ever seen.

---

<sup>129</sup> Prentiss, pp. 116-117.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 4. Prentiss arrives at this understanding of the bhakti as a movement informed by the work of early and modern scholars who explored the nature and impact of bhakti poetry. Initially viewed as the first instance of a monotheist reform movement and likened to Protestantism by orientalists such as H. Wilson and A. Grierson (3), this perspective persisted into the late 19th and early 20th century (13). However, contemporary scholarship drops the language of reform and monotheism, instead framing bhakti as a religious perspective arising from reflections on the Vedas and a revival of a once stagnant ‘cold’ and brahmanical tradition (15). Prentiss aligns with this understanding mainly due to reservations about the orientalists’ episteme or ideology which emphasises monotheism and comparison to Protestantism. Prentiss, nonetheless, uses the terms ‘reform’ and ‘revival’ interchangeably. The overlapping in meaning justifies this choice.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>135</sup> Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 168.

Where seven jump straight up to the least four times their height as five come down with grain in their beaks' (67). This spontaneous celebration of life draws a parallel with bhakti dancers, whose graceful movements embody a profound connection with the divine. Poems like 'Heart of Ruin', 'The Door', and 'The Doorstep' also transform ordinary scenes and objects within the temple town into expressions of bhakti devotion. In my close reading section, I will explore how these poems illustrate the poet-pilgrim's quest to trace the divine beyond the transcendent lordship of Khandoba, highlighting the touching reality of the dishevelled side of the temple rather than its architectural grandeur.

Finally, Kolatkar's *Jejuri* reflects the bhakti tradition's capacity to integrate diverse influences and present a dynamic, inclusive spirituality. Kolatkar's imagined temple-town, read as an analogy for India, makes room for the minor, strange, and spiritually-marginalised. For instance, in the poem 'Yeshwant Rao', the poet elevates a 'second class god' with a seemingly profane appearance, emphasising his relevance to mortals and his ability to grant physical and mental healing: 'Are you looking for a god? | I know a good one. | His name is Yeshwant Rao | and he's one of the best' (64). His poems also blend traditional religious imagery with modern elements. In 'The Door', Kolatkar interweaves concepts from other religions, comparing the door of the Hindu temple of Khandoba to a 'half-downed prophet' and 'a dangling martyr' (46), while in 'Ajamil and the Tigers', he incorporates a range of contemporary images, such as leather jackets, to bring a sense of modernity to his responses to the shrine and its ancient religious culture. This variety of sources shows how Kolatkar emulates the style of the bhakti saint-poets, who, as Prentiss notes, 'wove fragments of ancient and contemporary, esoteric and exoteric, mundane and sacred, and bits of realism and imagination together to create a cohesive discourse of bhakti'.<sup>136</sup> What held the fragments

---

<sup>136</sup> Prentiss, p. 52.

together, Prentiss contends, was the message of bhakti, which emphasises active engagement in devotion.<sup>137</sup> Hence, although bhakti poets drew upon many sources, none of these was uniformly adopted in its own right: '[t]hey used pieces to create their own distinctive whole'.<sup>138</sup> This bhakti quality is one that Kolatkar embodies in *Jejuri*, as I will elaborate in my analysis of the poems.

### **Critical reception: *Jejuri*'s artistic success and religious failure**

As a key-figure in post-independence Anglophone Indian poetry, Kolatkar stakes out a territory that, in terms of sensibility, does not welcome Hindu exclusivist or essentialist positions, fundamentalist or nationalist biases. The image he creates of the Khandoba temple is as spiritual and divine as it is ritualistic and crassly commercial, as archaic and ruinous as it is thriving and modern, and as quintessentially local and particular as it is amorphously diverse and inclusive. *Jejuri* defies easy essentialist categorisation by marrying recognisably English styles and techniques with themes and attitudes that are familiarly Indian, blurring the lines between the 'English poem' and 'Indian poem'. These daring thematic and linguistic decisions, in turn, made it difficult for Kolatkar to escape accusations of pandering to the colonial gaze for refusing to adopt a nativism invested in the recovery of a transcendent Indian-Hindu essence. Of course, for him such a position does not encapsulate the plural Hindu cultural prism within which he lives and writes. Kolatkar critiques the elitist nationalist project in India by exposing the hypocrisy, greed, and ignorance of brahman temple leaders. He also rejects the pretentiousness of traditional Hindu religiosity by offering glimpses of the sacred beyond the temple, in the everyday and mundane aspects of life. He, furthermore,

---

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

favours the stigmatized, strange, minor, peripheral, and non-spiritual sociological representations of Hinduism over its high conceptual and theoretical constructs. Above all, he conducts all these subversive explorations in the English language. It is, therefore, not surprising that many of Kolatkar's critics reacted with impatience to what they considered his modernist scepticism, and to the urbane sense of irony they felt in his poems.

Among those critics, two are particularly representative of a conservative nativist discourse.

First, an early response was given by the eminent Marathi critic and writer Bhalchandra Nemade, who accused Kolatkar of catering to the metropole and 'foreign' readership, a practice he believed was common among 'nearly all Indo-Anglian writers' and characterised as 'a dishonest trade'.<sup>139</sup> Nemade argued that *Jejuri* had a 'heavy tinge of colonial superciliousness', reducing Indian rituals and customs to mere 'documentary' subjects while emphasising 'the grossly materialistic aspect of Hinduism' and aligning more with 'English ethics' than Indian ones.<sup>140</sup> He further asserted that Kolatkar, akin to 'a weekend tourist from Bombay', is disconnected from the culture and sanctity of the places and people he writes about.<sup>141</sup> He emphasised that one does not 'go to a historical or religious place to ask such foolish questions as the protagonist asks of the priest's son whom, like a colonial tourist, he has hired as his guide'.<sup>142</sup> Nemade was, furthermore, unimpressed by the poet's focus on the rudimentary elements of the places and people of Jejuri, considering it to be reflective of Kolatkar's uncertain sense of what it is to be Indian and hesitation between mythical and empirical descriptions of the landscape. He was especially demoralised by the pilgrim's lack of reverence and stance of unfaith, which, to his mind, suggested a 'totally unIndian'

---

<sup>139</sup> Bhalchandra Nemade, 'Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Poetry' in *Indian Readings in Commonwealth Literature* ed. by G. S. Amur (New Delhi: Sterling, 1985), p. 82.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

sensibility.<sup>143</sup> Nemade based his accusations on the poet's use of the English language, arguing that it created an outsider's perspective in his work. Nemade posed the question, "[w]hy should someone who was born in Kolhapur, who studied in a Marathi school, and who is essentially a Marathi poet write in English?", concluding that Kolatkar had to reject "the realities of home" in order to stand out in the framework of "an alien tongue".<sup>144</sup> 'The India we know is misinterpreted' in *Jejuri*, Nemade disappointedly declared.<sup>145</sup>

Shirish Chindhade in his book *Five Indian English Poets* (1996) echoed Nemade, criticising *Jejuri* for its lack of native experience and cultural sensitivity. Chindhade sets out to primarily find out 'how much native experience does the poem reflect', but the answer he arrives at after an analysis of the collection, 'verges on the negative side'.<sup>146</sup> He stated, '[n]either in language nor in imagery nor in attitude does it evince the particularly native element expected and required of a visitor to Jejuri'.<sup>147</sup> Chindhade recognised the artistic success of the poem but considered it a religious failure. He, for instance, remarked upon its excellence in 'techniques of imagery, narrative skill and delineations, and superb detail' but concluded that the text is 'far from being truly Indian in sensibility'.<sup>148</sup> In this sense, *Jejuri*, a starkly and candidly secular poem about a religious place, formed a towering paradox to Chindhade: while it makes a striking success on the level of style, descriptions, analysis and humour, the poem appears almost like 'a travesty of an age-old culture' on the level of idiom and sensibility.<sup>149</sup>

---

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>144</sup> Bhalchandra Nemade, *Tikasvayamvara*, (Aurangabad: Saket Prakashan, 1990), pp. 123 - 126, qtd in Anjali Nerlekar, *Bombay Modern: Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Literary Culture* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

<sup>145</sup> Nemade, 'Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Poetry', p. 84.

<sup>146</sup> Shirish Chindhade, *Five Indian English Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, R. Parthasarathy* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 1996), p. 103.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., pp. 93;106;107.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

Many scholars have countered these conservative interpretive positions by providing more nuanced, and obviously less hostile, perspectives that challenge these preconceived notions of what Indian writing in English should yield, thus revealing a broader range of meanings within the text. Scholars such as Vidyan Ravinthiran, Emma Bird, and Laetitia Zecchini have all discussed Kolatkar's predicament as a non-nativist poet. Ravinthiran, on the one hand, contested the idea that Kolatkar was inadequately or inauthentically Indian, instead describing him as a poet who aimed for 'a type of exact factuality with aspirations toward something more: a nuanced understanding of India and its history'.<sup>150</sup> Ravinthiran noted that Kolatkar's 'tropes of sight' was meant to ensure accurate reporting, 'while also promulgating an unillusioned view of his nation's colonial past'.<sup>151</sup> Bird, similarly, cautioned against reducing literary works to fixed, nativist paradigms by noting that *Jejuri*'s 'microcosmic spatial and temporal composition' should invite readers to abandon any sense of detachment or distance, drawing them closer into the experience of the text.<sup>152</sup> This invitation should not, however, be seen as Kolatkar intending to exteriorise or distance readers from the text; rather, he continually involves them in the interpretive process, fostering 'a deep sense of empathy for the places and people he represents'.<sup>153</sup> Likewise, Zecchini argued that the cultural chauvinism and limiting of Indianness by conservative readers is problematic. In her view, Kolatkar's work demonstrates that no tradition is immune to interpretation and reinterpretation, and no identity is immune to historicity.<sup>154</sup> In response to Nemade, Zecchini asserted that there is 'no such thing as an illegitimate reading of India' and that 'what is

---

<sup>150</sup> Vidyan Ravinthiran, 'Arun Kolatkar's Description of India', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 49:3 (2014), p.359, doi:10.1177/0021989414533691.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> Emma Bird, 'Re-reading Postcolonial Poetry: Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47:2, (2012), p. 229, doi:10.1177/0021989412446018.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>154</sup> Laetitia Zecchini, 'Contemporary Bhakti Recastings', p. 272.

known is constantly estranged by the inexhaustibility of the sensible world and the defamiliarizing power of literature'.<sup>155</sup> Zecchini appreciates how Kolatkar's poetry defies 'majoritarian, petrified, and exclusive perceptions of identity', arguing that it counters Hindu nationalist ideology, which seeks to exclude 'so-called foreign, minor, or inauthentic elements'.<sup>156</sup> His poetry, according to Zecchini, emphasises 'the historicity of identity and of language against nativism' and advocates for 'the hospitality of poetics against the politics of expurgation'.<sup>157</sup>

It is understandable that the first group of critics may not readily accept these views; they may also reject Ashutosh Dubey's point that Kolatkar 'is under no obligation to go to a place of religious significance to kneel and pray'.<sup>158</sup> But arguing that *Jejuri* contains colonial prejudice misses the point of Kolatkar's challenge to established national and religious hierarchies. Kolatkar's refusal to conform to the rigid expectations of traditional Indian-Hindu culture is not a rejection of his heritage, but rather a reimagining of it. Some critics have successfully noted that this sensibility is not foreign to India because, as I demonstrated in the previous section, it has much in common with medieval bhakti saint-poets like Tukaram. Noting the similarity between the bhakti poets and Kolatkar, Bruce King interpreted the issue of alienation in *Jejuri* differently from nativist readers, who tend to condemn the protagonist's cynicism towards institutionalised religion. King viewed Kolatkar's approach as 'an ironic parody of pilgrimage' that mocks organised religion while celebrating 'the free imagination and dynamism of life'.<sup>159</sup> He posited that 'the protagonist's 'emotional withdrawal,

---

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Laetitia Zecchini, 'Strangeness and Historicity against Nativism: Blurring the Frontiers of the Nation in Arun Kolatkar's Poetry', *Orientalia Suecana* (2012), 60–70 (p. 60) <<https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-177287>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ashutosh Dubey, 'A Critical Appraisal of Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*', in *Indian Poetry in English: Critical Essays*, ed. by Zinia Mitra (Delhi: Prentice Hall India Learning Private Limited, 2016), p. 367.

<sup>159</sup> Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, p. 165

skepticism, and humour' function 'as a contemporary equivalent of the medieval bhakti saints', who are renowned for bypassing rituals and addressing the divine directly.<sup>160</sup>

Building on King's argument, Hari M. G. and H. S. Komalesha have more recently interpreted *Jejuri* as embodying a nuanced form of devotion that celebrates of the beauty and mystery of life, breaking away from the institutionalised 'structures that had imprisoned God within the shackles of religion and temple'.<sup>161</sup> The mystery of life that his poetry evokes, they argued, is similar to the eternal mystery of God that bhakti poets attempt to communicate in their verses, although, unlike bhakti poets, Kolatkar's devotion is not directed towards a personal deity, but towards the 'ordinary things among God's creations'.<sup>162</sup> His poetry invokes, according to them, the sacred in the everyday reality, one that exists in the present and is accessible to the senses and depicts life in a realistic and detailed way.<sup>163</sup> In this sense, Kolatkar's protagonist does not come across as an anglicised outsider looking down on his own traditions, but rather an insider who is actively engaged with and deeply sympathetic to the world around him. Through his poetry, he paints a vivid picture of the ordinary and the everyday, imbuing it with a sense of spirituality that is entirely his own. As Arvind Krishna Mehrotra pointed out in his introduction to Kolatkar's *Collected Poems in English*:

The matter of fact tone, bemused, seemingly offhand, is easy to get wrong, and Kolatkar's Marathi critics got it badly wrong, finding it to be cold, flippant, at best skeptical. They were forgetting of course, that the clarity of Kolatkar's observations would not be possible without abundant sympathy for the person or animal (or even

---

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Hari M.G. and Komalesha H.S., 'Sacred without God: Bhakti in the Poetry of Arun Kolatkar', *Asiatic*, 8:2, (2014), p. 150., doi:10.31436/asiatic.v8i2.494.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

inanimate object being observed); forgetting too that without abundant sympathy for what was being observed, the poems would not be acts of attention they are.<sup>164</sup>

Consequently, one could argue that Kolatkar's sceptical tone contains within it a significant cultural commentary on the irrelevance of the spiritual pretentiousness typical of nativists. If his protagonist is disengaged from such a position, then, this is perhaps because its representative establishments are distanced from him, not the other way round. Clearly, the poetic persona in this collection is unimpressed by the abstractions of religion because they do not affect him nor offer much to him. Therefore, instead of investing spirituality in the ideals of religion, he prefers to root it in the quotidian through which these abstractions filter and manifest. Therefore, even though Kolatkar's sense of irreverence is articulated and written in English, accusing the poet of lacking an authentic Indian sensibility diminishes the depth and complexity of his work, especially when we consider the rich Indian contexts of his poems. Kolatkar, who reworks local religious materials by conceiving a spirituality rooted in the world as it actually is, is reduced by the mainstream Hindu tradition in its nativist critical guise, as writing for a Western readership. There is, however, no reason to assume that Kolatkar's work is intended for a non-Indian audience, but for the fact that he never explained or footnoted his allusions to local places and figures, which indicates that the poem works within the assumption that the reader will understand the reference. This is not to say that Kolatkar's work cannot be appreciated by a non-Indian audience, as evidenced by the fact that *Jejuri* was first published in an American literary magazine, *Opinion Literary Quarterly*.<sup>165</sup> Instead, I believe that Kolatkar's poetry is rooted in Indian culture while also situated within a moving, heterodox, pluralistic, and evolving tradition.

---

<sup>164</sup> A. K. Mehrotra, 'Death of a Poet' in *Arun Kolatkar: Collected Poems in English*, ed. A. K. Mehrotra (Tarsit: Bloodaxe, 2010), p. 14.

<sup>165</sup> Hari. and Komalesha, p. 152.

## **Kolatkar's shifting narrative voice, structure, and beguiling simplicity**

*Jejuri* consists of thirty poems that capture a series of encounters and reflections by a narrator journeying through the town of Jejuri. The journey begins with the narrator arriving by bus and concludes at the railway station, where he prepares to leave. The narrator is accompanied by Manohar, a Marathi poet and novelist who joined Kolatkar on his 1964 trip to Jejuri, and Makarand, Kolatkar's younger brother, also accompanied them.<sup>166</sup> Each character is featured in a poem titled with their names, and the narrator interacts with them in the second person. The narrator also interacts with various other characters such as the temple priest and other inhabitants of the town, including an old man, an old woman, and a Murli woman. Although we know Kolatkar wrote *Jejuri* after visiting the temple-town, he seldom uses a personal first-person voice associated with the poet-pilgrim. When using a first-person narrator, Kolatkar often lends his voice to historical figures like Chaitanya or members of lower castes like the Vaghya. Kolatkar's use of multiple points of view grants the collection a subjectivity that encompasses a wide range of perspectives that allow for a rich and nuanced understanding of the temple life. His purposeful alternation between perspectives, I argue, fosters unpredictability, empathy, relatability, and multiplicity. Structurally, the sequence of poems does not unfold in a cohesive unit of consecutive moments; rather, they follow the narrator's line of movement and stream of thoughts. In other words, *Jejuri* is a complex web in which the speaker travels back in time, stays in the present or gives voice to historical figures to reimagine the past. The multi-perspectivism and non-linear narratology are markers of Kolatkar's appropriation of bhakti poetic techniques – the reworking of local materials, under examination within my thesis. These reworkings serve his subversive purposes: by investing

---

<sup>166</sup> Zecchini, 'Notes' in Kolatkar, *Collected Poems*, pp. 365-366.

in the subjectivity of a variety of characters, Kolatkar affords the construction of a collective discourse of bhakti that stands apart from hegemonic norms. By interweaving history and the present, he creates an alternative genealogy of historical pluralism that suggests that the past is not simply the preserve of nationalists. Although Kolatkar does not arrange the poems of *Jejuri* in a coherent linear development, the narrator's pilgrimage takes place within a specific time framework; it begins before dawn as he boards a bus to the temple-town and ends at sunset while awaiting a departing train. Accordingly, I categorise the poems into three stages that reflect the thematic journey of the narrator throughout his exploration of Jejuri: his bus journey towards the temple-town, inside the sacred town of Jejuri, and upon exiting it.

#### En route to Jejuri: a departure from the mainstream Hindu religiosity

The narrator of *Jejuri* embarks on an untraditional pilgrimage. While pilgrims often follow age-old customs and seek guidance from priests to attain purification and blessings, the narrator sets out on a different path. His quest is one of self-discovery, where he observes and questions the power dynamics at play in organised Hinduism, including its commodification of faith, empowerment of intermediaries, and oppression of marginalised castes. Through this poetic narrative, Kolatkar establishes himself as a modern-day bhakti poet, following in the footsteps of revered figures such as Tukaram. He critiques religious institutions and rejects the notion that divine connection requires priestly mediation. Instead, his unconventional bhakti-inspired approach emphasises direct, personal spiritual experience. These attitudes and concerns are compatible with the modernist scepticism towards institutions and interest in the subjective experience, which makes Kolatkar a distinctive voice that adds to the collective bhakti discourse a modernist perspective.

The pilgrimage journey begins in ‘The Bus’, the opening poem of *Jejuri*, where we are introduced to a nonconformist narrator who becomes the eye through which readers vicariously experience a day in the life of this temple town. Speaking in an interior monologue, the narrator confesses his alienation from traditional Hindu spirituality and his conscious effort to break away from its constraints. The tone of the poem is sombre, featuring surreal imagery and graphic language that indicate the speaker’s discomfort in the company of pilgrims who appear to be more conventional than he is, while they are all on a bus, where a sense of collective blindness reigns. This blindness is transitory and will dissolve with the arrival of the sun. In the meantime, the dark, cold interior of the bus, with its tarpaulin flaps covering the windows, is foreboding, and the ‘whipping’ wind seems to attack the pilgrims. The only light inside the bus is so dim that it only serves to highlight the pilgrim’s sense of disorientation and division. The auditory imagery of the road roaring intensifies the mood, while the narrator is left searching ‘for signs of daybreak’, only to find his ‘own divided face’ reflected on ‘a pair of glasses | on an old man’s nose’ (42).

This opening scene sets the stage for a journey that is both physical and spiritual, one that will challenge the narrator’s beliefs and lead him to a deeper understanding of himself and the world around him. The image of the divided face reflected in the old man’s glasses evokes a contrast between the societal norms and traditional values, represented by the old man, and the narrator’s personal introspection and individual worldview. When the narrator looks at the old man’s forehead, he reflects on ‘the caste mark between his eyebrows’ (42), which serves as a visual representation of religious affiliation and a reminder of the segregation and discrimination in the hierarchised Hindu society. The positioning of the narrator and the old man, as noted by many readers, represents a juxtaposition of contrasting attitudes, with the old man representing traditional, devout beliefs and the narrator representing a modern, urban

perspective. Some readers have criticised the narrator's stance, saying it shows a decline in his religious sensitivity, which hinders his ability to appreciate traditional culture.<sup>167</sup> But the poem does not explicitly depict the narrator as lacking a devout sensibility or as looking down or feeling morally or spiritually superior over the other pilgrim. He simply feels discomfort upon looking at the caste mark the elderly man wears on his forehead. The caste mark, a symbol of tradition, does not necessarily signify religious devotion or spirituality, and the narrator's rejection of it highlights his opposition to a hierarchical understanding of society. His seeming dislike of external markers of social and spiritual privileges indicates a deeper commitment to principles of equality and genuine spirituality. From this perspective, the narrator's contrast with the old man is not necessarily a sign of modern irreligiosity, but rather a departure from a unitary traditional culture and its caste-based essentialism. This unorthodoxy that dramatizes the confusion between the spiritual and the profane, or in other words, between the manifestations of spirituality and irreligiousness and vice versa is a theme commonly explored by bhakti saint-poets; Kolatkar continues the tradition of bhakti by regenerating this conflict in a contemporary context. As readers, we are also drawn into this conflict, given the direct second address used in the poem, which invites us to participate in a dialogue that reevaluates the meaning of religiosity in the society of the 1970s.

'The Bus' questions the viability of steadfast traditional religiosity. It employs the sun as a transformative force that helps mutate the speaker's mood and attitude from a state of division to one of clarity and enlightenment. The arrival of the sun in the following stanza presents a turning point in the poem.

---

<sup>167</sup> See V. Pradnya Sawant, 'Representation of Religion in Kolatkar's *Jejuri*', *Journal of Higher Education and Research*, Willington College (2013), p. 3. S. Chindhadem, *Five Indian English Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, R. Parthasarathy* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2001), p. 102. Ravindra Kimbahune, "From *Jejuri* to Arun Kolatkar," in *Jejuri: A Commentary and Critical Perspectives*, ed. Shubhangi Raykar (Pune: Prachet, 1995) p. 76.

Outside, the sun has risen quietly.  
It aims through an eyelet in the tarpaulin  
and shoots at the old man's glasses.

A sawed off sunbeam comes to rest  
gently against the driver's right temple.  
The bus seems to change direction (42).

As the bus journeys towards its destination, the sun's arrival changes its course, providing the narrator with a moment of clarity. The initial discomfort that the speaker felt at the beginning of the poem was reflected through the depiction of the little light inside the bus, creating to the speaker an unnerving sensation of being divided. However, as the sun rises, its beam contrasts the dark and windy road, illuminating the old man's glasses through the tarpaulin causing the bus to appear to change direction. This shift represents a journey towards a new perspective, a spiritual journey beyond the caste mark of the old man. The image of the sun is a recurrent motif in *Jejuri* symbolising progress, change, and momentum. S. K. Desai observes that the sun is a central symbol associated with the Hindu deity Khandoba.<sup>168</sup> Yet the poet keeps this local connotation subtle, choosing to personify the sun as a universal symbol of gentle yet potent force that illuminates the scene. Vidyan Ravinthiran highlights Kolatkar's comparison of the sun to 'a sniper or hitman', with phrases like 'sawed off sunbeam' adding a playful yet menacing tone.<sup>169</sup> This personification introduces a sense of 'genuine threat', suggesting 'a dissipation of the religious mentality the speaker is travelling to the temple town

---

<sup>168</sup> S. K. Desai, 'Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*: A House of God', on: *Jejuri: A Commentary and Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Shubhangi Raykar (Pune: Prachet, 1995), p. 207.

<sup>169</sup> Ravinthiran, p. 365.

to record; the old man's way of life is under fire from the forces of the new day'.<sup>170</sup> This dissipation becomes imminent as the bus alters its direction. The bus driver is also an integral part of this transition. The abrupt touch of the sun on his temple does not just hint at a divine contact but also implies that he himself embodies a sacred space within the mundane setting of the bus. This image is common in bhakti poetry, where poets, much like Kolatkar here, perceive temples beyond mere stone structures, recognising the body itself as a temple.<sup>171</sup> Kolatkar plays on the double meaning of the English word 'temple' to weave together the transcendent and the mundane, spotlighting the effect of the driver's participation in changing the direction of the bus. This example showcases Kolatkar's cleverness in reworking the local element – the bhakti metaphor of the body as a temple – through the use of equivocal language. He chooses an English word that effectively communicates the bhakti message that the divine can exist in the material.

The bus journey ends with the realisation that the narrator cannot accept the old man's perspective:

At the end of a bumpy ride  
with your own face on either side  
when you get off the bus

you don't step inside the old man's head (42).

Although the pilgrimage journey continues until sunset, we realise early on that this is a pilgrim who will enter the temple with an aversion to traditional temple worship and active opposition to its stratified social reality. This is because, instead of offering a conclusion that

---

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> See, for instance, Appar's poem 'Inside this house called the body', as translated by Prentiss, p. 154.

settles with essentialist constructs of identity, the narrator ends his ride retaining a divided face that is reflected on the two external mirrors of the bus. This ‘divided face’ symbolised a fractured self, troubled by the alienation from conventions at the start of the journey.

However, the fracture no longer seems disconcerting, for it apparently provides a panoramic and expanded perspective that makes him more determined not to ‘step inside the old man’s head’. With its slightly comic tone, this line signifies the poet-narrator’s disregard for the traditional values upheld by the old man and his preference for maintaining an independent perspective, arguably influenced by the principles of bhakti.

#### Inside Jejuri: beyond the temple: towards spiritual independence

In ‘The Priest’, the second poem of *Jejuri*, Kolatkar provides a direct critique of the temple system. The narrative flashes forward to bring to the fore the ugly reality and exploitative nature of a priest in Jejuri. The bus has not yet arrived: it ‘is no more just a thought in [the priest’s] head’ (43), and a third-person narrator takes the reader on a journey into the priest’s mind, exposing a lack of consideration towards his role as a custodian of the sacred place. The priest’s thoughts revolve around the arrival of the bus and the pilgrims, demonstrating his eagerness to collect offerings rather than focusing on the religious significance of their visit. He anxiously waits, wondering why the bus is ‘a little bit late’, and pondering whether there will ‘be a puran poli on his plate’ (43). Kolatkar’s criticism focuses primarily on the human failure of the priest to live up to spiritual ideals, which suggests his desire for reform rather than rejecting spirituality altogether. If upheld properly, Kolatkar seems to believe that the spiritual life, even within the priesthood, is potentially commendable. Meanwhile, the narrator seems contemptuous of the priest’s greed and hunger for the sweet dish and associates it with sexual compulsiveness: ‘With a quick intake of testicle | at the touch of the rough cut, dew

drenched stone' (43). The priest's repetitive chewing of a 'betel nut', as if it were 'a mantra' (43), further illustrates his lack of sincere devotion. Typically, a mantra is chanted to summon deities for protection and to influence the world, yet the poem reveals that the priest's prayer is made for the bus to arrive, again highlighting his disregard for the temple's sacredness and his focus on the benefits he can obtain from his position. Kolatkar's contrast of the sacred act of chanting a mantra with the priest's profane manner underscores that the speaker, far from being irreligious, is only highlighting a form of sanctioned profanity enacted by a religious figure. Hence, the speaker's disdain for traditional conceptualisations of religion stems from the recognition of the disparity between the assumed sanctity of religious heads and the forces of commercialisation they admit to the sacred place. When the bus arrives, it

Stops inside the bus station and stands  
purring softly in front of the priest.

A catgrin on its face  
and a live, ready to eat pilgrim  
held between its teeth (43-44).

This metaphor represents the priest as a predatory figure, likened to a cat eagerly anticipating its prey. Throughout the scenes of the poem, we sense the irony about whether the priest is praying or preying in the name of religion, which aptly brings out Kolatkar's perception of the exploitation and commercialisation in and of a place of worship like Jejuri. Kolatkar's suspicion about the honesty of the brahman priest is an example of his internalisation of a bhakti sensibility against the privileges accorded to those at the top of the social hierarchy. In this sense, the bhakti tradition is made contemporary by Kolatkar because it is a renewable source of inspiration that allows him to comment on the issues and dilemmas of his time.

In the course of his critique of the corruption within the temple, Kolatkar also addresses the exploitation of non-brahman devotees of Khandoba, as presented in the two poems ‘A Song for a Vaghya’ and ‘A Song for a Murli’. In the accompanying notes to *Jejuri*, Zecchini indicates that the Vaghya are ‘the male disciples’ of Khandoba, while the Murlis are his ‘female devotees, courtesans, and wives’.<sup>172</sup> They are often boys and girls given up by their parents to serve and worship Khandoba. They are an essential part of the Khandoba cult, and their duties include maintaining and taking care of the temple and its surroundings. As we know from a first-person Vaghya, speaking of his duties, he says that he is responsible for going around the holy place, carrying ‘a can of oil’, and begging pilgrims to fill it to keep Khandoba’s temple lighted (56-57). His only aim is devotion to Khandoba. Nevertheless, while the act of begging for oil highlights a deep-seated inequality in the temple system, this task also seems to force him to resort to morally questionable actions. He admits that if his oil can is not filled, he is ready to ‘steal’, for ‘Khandoba’s temple | rises with the day. | But it must not fall | with the night’ (56-57). This admission reflects the harsh reality of his situation, where the pressures and inadequacies of the temple’s social structure compel him to act unethically to fulfil his religious duties.

Kolatkar’s poem draws on multiple mythical associations of the Vaghya community to highlight the ethical compromises they confront as a result of ongoing poverty among lower Hindu castes. For instance, he references the Vaghya’s association with tigers to describe the deceit behind their devotion. Zecchini clarifies that the Vaghya’s ‘origin myth associates them with tigers’ and points out that ‘they often carry a tiger-skin pouch with turmeric powder inside’.<sup>173</sup> Turmeric, she elaborates, ‘is an essential element of the Khandoba cult. It is the

---

<sup>172</sup> Zecchini, ‘Notes’ in Kolatkar, *Collected Poems*, pp. 365-366.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365.

poor man's substitute for gold and represents the substance of God'.<sup>174</sup> In the poem, the Vaghya speaker confesses that he killed not just any tiger, but 'my mother | for her skin'; he did this 'to make this pouch | I keep turmeric in' (56). This startling act, he, in a nonchalant tone, says, 'didn't take much' (56), underlying his indifference to moral boundaries when weighed against the practical needs of a religious practice such as carrying turmeric.

Traditionally, furthermore, the Vaghya community has been associated with dogs. On special occasions, Zecchini reveals, they even mimic the animals' behaviour, 'barking and eating from begging bowls'.<sup>175</sup> The Vaghya speaker acknowledges his perplexing situation by contemplating the traditional idea of Khandoba's dual nature as both a benevolent and powerful deity. He describes his service to Khandoba as a combination of surrender and strength. In a clever play on words, the Vaghya subverts the etymology of 'God', stating,

God is the word

and I know it backwards.

I know it as fangs

inside my flanks.

But I also know it

as a lamb

between my teeth,

as a taste of blood

upon my tongue (57).

This stanza is representative of Kolatkar's endeavour to cultivate an inclusive culture within the temple. He openly explores the complex and paradoxical concept of god from the

---

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 366.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 365.

perspective of a temple servant. Kolatkar grants the Vaghya, who we know is situated at the periphery of the temple hierarchy, a personal voice to describe Khandoba. Here, he tells us, ‘God is the word | and I know it backwards’. The wordplay in these lines, where ‘God’ becomes ‘dog’, reflects the speaker’s recognition of his role as humble and obedient servants of Khandoba. The reversal from ‘God’ to ‘dog’ highlights the power dynamics in this devotional relationship, suggesting that worshipping Khandoba involves not only reverence but also the possibility of suffering and subjugation. This harsher aspect of religious service is further emphasised in the metaphor ‘I know it as fangs | inside my flanks’, portraying the deity not as a benevolent protector, but as a force capable of causing harm or demanding sacrifice. This image is yet immediately juxtaposed in the subsequent lines with the image of God as ‘a lamb | between my teeth’ (57), which suggests a gentler, more submissive aspect of the divine. Kolatkar’s incorporation of the Christian metaphor of God as a lamb to reference a local Indian god is also inclusive because it illuminates the commonality and universality of conceptions of the divine between different religious traditions. In the context of the poem, the metaphor of god as a lamb is also used to reveal the exploitative nature of the Vaghya, as the image of him holding a lamb between his teeth is reminiscent of the predator-like behaviour of the priest mentioned earlier.

Nonetheless, Kolatkar presents the Vaghya as a victim of the decaying Hindu social conventions. He indicates that the poor boy’s only attire consists of a torn ‘yellow scarf’ given to him by ‘the sun’ (56). The inclusion of this detail tells that the Vaghya lacks the resources to obtain better clothing. If he became corrupt and exploitative himself, this is due to the inequalities perpetuated by the Hindu caste system, which he seems well aware of. Upon closer examination of this poem, it becomes clear that Kolatkar rejects the commercialisation of religion in a society where some exploit it for easy profit, because this leads to a divide

between the rich and poor, making it harder for those less fortunate to connect with the divine. After all, the servant recognises he is only a devotional bard of Khandoba. He thus holds his one-stringed instrument, the traditional ektara, which gives him ‘just one pitch’ (57). Though dissatisfied with the monotonous tune it gives, the Vaghya is bereft of any agency. Powerless to change the song, he declares, ‘who am I to complain’, ‘this is the only song | I’ve always sung’ (57).

Further representation of the poverty-stricken temple community appears in ‘A Song for a Murli’. The poem creates a vivid contrast between the supposed holiness of the temple and the sordid reality of its hypocrisy. The temple dancer, who is supposed to be a virtuous devotee of Lord Khandoba, is revealed to be a prostitute, using her position to extract money from pilgrims. This aspect of Murli is suggested by the ironic imperative language of the speaker, who seems to be warning a temple visitor against overstepping the boundaries of what belongs to Lord Khandoba:

keep your hands off khandoba’s woman

you old lecher

let’s see the colour of your money first (58).

Murlis, as previously noted, are female devotees and wives of Khandoba. However, the narrator’s portrayal of the Murli in the poem withholding physical intimacy from the visitor does not signify her loyalty to Khandoba. Rather, it is a strategic move to extort money from pilgrims. While the poem might point to the Murli’s actions as an example of religious corruption, it also critiques pilgrims who exploit this religious arrangement for their own desires. Within the economy of sexual services, in other words, the poem does not put the burden of critique only on those who provide them, but also on those who demand them. The

pilgrim, portrayed as lecherous, is implicated in the exploitation. Just like what happened to the Vaghya, who is trapped by the socioeconomic conditions that limit his options, the temple dancer also finds herself confined within a system that compels her to exploit her position for financial gain. Both figures are products of a society that perpetuates inequality and exploitation, revealing how the commercialisation of religious and social roles often leads to moral compromises and corruption. This is not to suggest that the poem itself portrays native religions and cultures as backward, corrupt, or morally deficient. Instead, it embodies a bhakti-inspired critique of how institutionalised and hierarchical religious systems can become tools of exploitation and social inequality rather than sources of spirituality.

Kolatkar portrays the temple system as oppressive, exploiting, and marginalising those considered outcasts in society. The Vaghya and Murli castes are not the only groups suffering at the bottom of the hierarchy; Jejuri is populated with beggars for whom poverty is inescapable, as Kolatkar suggests that priests hold the exclusive right to regulate the pilgrims' journey. In 'An Old Woman', we encounter a destitute elderly woman who is neglected by the temple community, and pilgrims neither hire her as a tour guide nor make offerings to her in place of the priest. She tries to act as a local guide to the protagonist, proposing to lead him to 'the horseshoe shrine' in exchange for 'a fifty paise coin' (49). Having already visited the shrine with the priest, the protagonist declines her offer. Regardless, 'She hobbles along anyway | and tightens her grip on your shirt. | She won't let you go. | You know how old women are. | They stick to you like a burr' (49). Even though the protagonist makes it clear that he wishes to conclude this encounter 'with an air of finality' (50), beneath his impatient tone is a compassion that befits the bhakti spirit he harbours.

You look right at the sky.

Clear through the bullet holes

she has for her eyes.

[...]

And the hills crack.

And the temples crack.

And the sky falls

[...]

And you are reduced

to so much small change

in her hand (50).

Unlike the old man's caste mark, which reminded us of the ills of a divided society earlier in *Jejuri*, the eyes of the old woman, who herself is victim of the stratified temple community, are portrayed as bullet holes that exert cosmic influence. These bullet eyes cause fracture in the surrounding hills, the temple, and the sky. This cosmic fracture conveys the decay of the temple, which humbles the speaker, who feels – just as we do through his use of the second person – 'reduced' to mere 'small change' in the old woman's hand. Kolatkar's presentation of the hardships faced by the Vaghya, Murlis, and beggars, akin to bhakti saint-poets, speaks truth to power and calls for inclusive and fair reforms in temple practices. If his critique of the caste-based power imbalance through the lens of bhakti causes discomfort because it is presented in English poetry, with critics like Nemade and Chindhade claiming he distorts

Hinduism to cater to foreign readers, it seems that their stance inadvertently reinforces oppressive ideologies and sustains the marginalisation of certain groups. Evoking the anti-establishment sensibility of bhakti in English broadens its impact and makes it accessible and relevant to diverse, contemporary audiences, in India and elsewhere.

Kolatkar takes a further critical stance and questions the legitimacy of the brahman priestly intermediary roles and the pretentious beliefs and orthodox rituals they offer to devotees. In ‘The Blue Horse’, the narrator attends a festival in the temple in honour of Lord Khandoba, which involves a night-long musical recitation. According to Hindu traditions, music in the temple is an essential element of rituals and festivals as it is often ‘believed to be the sonic manifestation of the deity, and it makes the deity’s presence immediate and real to worshippers’.<sup>176</sup> The narrator, however, observes the scene with a critical eye, questioning the authenticity of the religious experience, noting how

The toothless singer

opens her mouth.

Shorts the circuits

in her haywire throat.

A shower of sparks

flies off her half burnt tongue.

With a face fallen in on itself

and a black skin burnt blacker in the sun,

---

<sup>176</sup> Yoshitaka Terada, ‘Temple Music Traditions in Hindu South India: Periya Mēlam and its Performance Practice’, *Asian Music Journal*, (2008), p. 109, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501587>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

the drummer goes blue in the face  
as he thumbs and whacks the tambourine  
and joins the chorus in a keyless passion (65).

The narrator's scepticism is evident in his description of the performers: the 'toothless singer' and the 'drummer', who is visibly strained to the point that his face turns 'blue'. The poem's portrayal of these performers evokes a sense of decay and exhaustion that perhaps symbolises the ineffectiveness of temple festivals. Such festivals, the poem suggests, are worn-out spectacles, lacking the vitality and spiritual resonance they are meant to evoke. The singer's throat described as short-circuiting throat with 'sparks' flying off her 'half-burnt tongue' suggests that her voice is erratic and unstable. If her role is to elevate the spiritual atmosphere, the result appears neither impactful nor transformative. The narrator's critical perspective extends to the music itself, which does not resonate as divine or uplifting. The drummer, for instance, 'joins the chorus in a keyless passion', a phrase that conveys a lack of harmony. While the word 'passion' might imply some level of intensity or emotion, the qualifier 'keyless' suggests that this emotion is chaotic. In this context, I suggest, the drummer's performance feels discordant, devoid of the passion one might expect in a ritual setting.

Furthermore, the narrator's observations of the non-diverse racial backgrounds of the performers and their location within the temple premises raise questions about the nature of unity and equality within the temple. As per Hindu traditions, devotional singers and musicians are typically non-brahman, and like other temple personnel who belong to different castes, they are often excluded from entering the temples or touching sacred images.<sup>177</sup> These practices are linked to the caste system and its associated colourism, which assigns different

---

<sup>177</sup> C.J. Fuller, 'Gods, Priests and Purity: On the Relation Between Hinduism and the Caste System', *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 14:3 (1979), p. 463 doi:10.2307/2801869.

roles and jobs based on an individual's caste and skin colour. While the poem does not explicitly critique the caste system or colourism, the implication of these racial politics is not lost on the narrator. His observation of the outside position of the singer with 'the burnt tongue' and the drummer with 'a black skin burnt blacker in the sun' is a nuanced commentary on the hierarchies and inequities prevalent within the temple's culture and society. This critique becomes particularly pronounced as he draws attention to the contrast between the exclusion of these performers from the central rituals of the temple and the priest who, in Kolatkar's view, has the privilege 'to arrange | that bit of sacred cabaret at his own house' (66). In addition, the narrator exposes inconsistencies and dishonesty within the temple by challenging the priest regarding a white horse painting displayed on the wall. The singers reference a blue horse, yet the picture of Khandoba shows the horse as white. The narrator questions the priest, who arranged the 'sacred cabaret', about the painting. Despite the visual evidence, the priest nonchalantly shifts a 'betel nut | from the left to the right of his mouth' (66) and insists that the horse appears blue to him. He even draws a line on the animal's underbelly 'to suggest shadow on an object otherwise white' (66). While such an experience will likely always make temple worship appear devoid of the authenticity, inclusivity, and consistency of true bhakti (i.e., devotion) in the eyes of the protagonist, the other devotees unfortunately blindly accept the priest's explanation, and 'The tambourine continues to beat its breast' (66).

When accompanied by a priest, the narrator seems keen only to express his distrust in the credibility of the clerical authority to impart an ultimate truth. A similar situation to that in 'The Blue Horse' occurs in 'A Low Temple', where the narrator follows the priest to a cave temple shrouded in darkness. The priest, who is the primary custodian of the temple, does not carry a lamp and instead borrows matches from the protagonist to light the temple. As the

matchsticks burn, gods ‘come to light’ ‘one by one’ (47). The narrator becomes acutely aware of the transient nature of perception and ordinary experience. However, the priest’s lack of knowledge and understanding of the gods and goddesses whom he worships everyday troubles the narrator. When the narrator asks about the identity of a statue, the priest misidentifies it, highlighting his ignorance: ‘Who was that, you ask. | The eight arm goddess, the priest replies’ (47). But ‘A sceptic match coughs’ (47), drawing the attention of the protagonist to count the arms of the goddess. The light of matchsticks, likewise that of the sun, symbolises illumination and enlightenment. It hence reveals that the goddess has actually ‘eighteen arms’, leading the protagonist to question the validity of the priest’s knowledge. Refusing to be wrapped up in blind religiosity, he protests the priest’s error and corrects him; regardless, she remains ‘an eight arm goddess to the priest’ (47). This conversation distinguishes between people who mistake perception for truth and those who seek knowledge through sensory or empirical evidence. As Emma Bird notes, these lines reveal the extent to which the priest has been conditioned to accept what the statue of the goddess signifies to him, unlike the narrator who ‘enters the temple without any such preconceived ideas about what he might find inside, and is thus able to describe how the statue actually appears’.<sup>178</sup> This scene thus underscores the importance of questioning preconceived ideas and seeking knowledge through an individualised empirical approach. In response to this frustration, the narrator withdraws from the temple and encounters permanent sunlight, which represents his departure from the ignorance and blindness of tradition into the light of true knowledge: ‘You come out in the sun and light a charminar’ (47).

In the context of this poem, the act of smoking outside the temple has a subversive significance; it represents the protagonist’s attempt to break free from the confines of

---

<sup>178</sup> Bird, p. 239.

organised religion for a more personalised and inclusive approach to spirituality. The fact that the protagonist leaves the temple and uses the same matchbox he lent to the priest to light up the temple to now light a cigarette highlights the contrast between two different paths to enlightenment: organised and personal. While the protagonist's search for spiritual enlightenment through traditional channels fails due to the priest's inability to metaphorically enlighten the temple, smoking outside seems to be symbolic of the protagonist's independence from the guidance of organised religion. This technique of defamiliarization is often employed by Kolatkar to convey the narrator's disillusionment with the superficiality and inauthenticity that are rampant within the temple. For instance, in 'Makarand' the speaker's choice to stay outside 'in the courtyard' and 'smoke' instead of performing 'pooja' (60) – the offering of substances to the deity – inside the temple is also an act of defiance against the priest's demand of him to conform to the traditional norms. His rejection of the priest's demand to remove his shirt so that he can enter the inner sanctum of Lord Khandoba's temple 'to do pooja' (60) shows the limits of how worship can be performed and who can participate in it. Thus, by instead choosing to engage in a mundane activity like smoking, the speaker creates a sharp contrast between the inflexible ritual and the personal choice to find spiritual inspiration outside the temple. Through this subversion, smoking becomes a form of contemplation, a moment of solitude and reflection, a spiritual experience in itself. The act of smoking is elevated beyond its physical aspect also given the fact that the speaker lights up in the 'country yard', seeing in the natural world a source of divine inspiration. This setting suggests that the divine force can be found everywhere, and that one does not need to follow conventional rituals or expectations to connect with it.

Irony is another key technique Kolatkar employs to express his protagonist's perception of traditional religious rituals as hollow and superstitious. In 'A Little Pile of Stones' he recounts

a priest's detailed instructions to a young woman on how to choose an ideal spot to build a stone structure where she may stand to get his blessings: 'find a place | where the ground is not too uneven [...] | put a stone | on top of another [...] | and so on' (59). The priest advises the bride on the importance of selecting stones that are 'the right size' and 'weight' (59), and how to consider the structure as a whole when choosing each one. Despite the priest's advice, the narrator maintains a sarcastic tone insinuating that the bride's intelligence is what ultimately leads to her success in selecting the stones. Although the poem concludes with the priest blessing the bride, the narrator wryly expresses a hope that she may be 'just as lucky' as she is 'smart' (59), suggesting that these qualities may outweigh the priest's blessings in ensuring a happy union.

The role of priests as intermediaries is also mocked in the poem 'The Temple Rat', where the narrator witnesses another marriage ceremony, observing a teen girl kneeling and offering gold bangles in the lord's 'stone linga' (61). The narrator notes that the priest appears to be pleased by the girl's copious offering, which leaves a 'trace of a smile' buried under his 'grey, week deep beard' (61). However, the priest's pleasure is subverted by the fact that the temple rat, which was sitting on 'the mighty shoulder | of the warrior god' Khandoba: 'having noticed' the priest's smile, the rat immediately 'disappears in a corner of the sanctum' (61). The ironic synchronicity between the rat's movements and the priest's actions exposes a world in which the traditional religious hierarchy, with the priest as the intermediary between worshippers and the divine, is shown to be flawed and corrupt. While the fact that a lowly and seemingly insignificant creature like a rat reacts against this corruption implies that it has a more dynamic and genuine connection to the divine than the petrified and corrupt rituals that the priest represents.

The presence of a rat in the central shrine of Lord Khandoba provides another ironic contrast; the fact that the protagonist is occupied with the rat's presence and movement instead of the homage of Lord Khandoba calls into question the relevance of idol worship in Jejuri. The narrator's perspective on idolatry is not necessarily denunciatory. Rather, Kolatkar, much like his bhakti predecessors, attempts an exploration of the complex relationship between the divine and the visible image or form it may assume, as depicted in the poem 'A Scratch'. While wandering in Jejuri, the narrator's enquiring eye falls upon numerous stones that are believed to embody the divine. At times, it becomes challenging for him to distinguish between stones that are considered sacred and those that are plain and ordinary:

what is god  
and what is stone  
the dividing line  
if it exists  
is very thin  
at jejuri  
and every other stone  
is god or his cousin (53).

He looks at a large rock, 'the size of a bedroom' (53). It is believed to be the wife of Khandoba, who he, in a fit of rage, struck down. The 'crack that runs across' the rock 'is the scar' she received from her husband's 'broadsword' (53). This is a preserved narrative about Khandoba and his wife, which has been passed down generations of Hindu believers. The protagonist seems receptive to tradition. However, he swings between faith and disbelief because he realises that, in this hard 'bad earth', 'there is no crop | other than god | and god is harvested here | around the year' (53). The deification of rocks is, therefore, the only

occupation through which priests can earn for their livelihood. Upon coming to this realisation, the narrator appears unable to reconcile the materialistic demands of his environment with the divinity that stones can possess. This internal conflict ultimately leads him to express blasphemous thoughts, mocking that fact that anyone can ‘scratch a rock | and a legend springs’ (53). Nevertheless, this sense of disbelief contrasts with the sentiment expressed in ‘The Horseshoe Shrine’, which recounts a significant moment in the mythological tale of Khandoba’s impressive leap across a valley with his bride on his majestic blue horse: ‘That nick in the rock | is really a kick in the side of the hill. | It’s where a hoof | struck’ (48). In a tone of celebration and reverence, furthermore, the poem celebrates the unity and shared energy between Khandoba, his bride, and his horse as ‘the three | went on from there like one | spark | fleeing from flint’ (48). It finally rejoices over a sense of closure, with the journey leading them to a warm and welcoming ‘home that waited | on the other side of the hill like a hay | stack’ (48).

Therefore, it is quite safe to infer that the protagonist of *Jejuri* is not opposed to idolatry altogether, but to the commodification of objects that hold potential divinity. As depicted in the three poems titled ‘Chaitanya’, which transport us back to the time this medieval bhakti reformer visited the town of Jejuri. In one of the poems, Chaitanya, unlike the orthodox brahman of his time, believed that devotion is not tied to ritual and social status. He pleads to a stone-god to wipe off ‘the red paint’ that designates it as a deity, asserting that the stone deserves devotion even in its ‘plain’ and unadorned condition (47). In another poem, we witness his personal and reciprocal relationship with the divine, the sweet stones of Jejuri: ‘he popped a stone | in his mouth | and spat out gods’ (50). Despite advocating for a non-exclusive, popular devotion, Chaitanya’s influence was confined to a small circle, depicted in the third poem as ‘a herd of legends | on a hill slope’ that ‘looked up from its grazing | when

chaitanya came in sight' (66). His impact, moreover, was short-lived: this very 'herd of legends' quickly 'returned to grazing' once Chaitanya 'disappeared from view' (66).

Although Chaitanya's impact seems transient and limited in his lifetime, its current merit lies in illuminating the complex blend of history that goes into forming what has come to be called the Hindu faith. By invoking Chaitanya, Kolatkar highlights that Jejuri's past is not the preserve of brahmans; he also aligns his contemporary quest with the preceding, personal, direct, and inclusive path of Chaitanya, positioning himself within the collective discourse of bhakti that sought a more profound spirituality beyond the superficiality and insincerity of temple worship.

Returning to the present day, the narrator seems to have gained a keen awareness that contemporary Jejuri has become a site for commercial gain rather than a place of devotion. Therefore, he does not seem willing to mourn the gods who are exploited by their disciples, nor does he feel nostalgic for the divine that once animated stones and idols but may have since departed. Instead, as in 'The Cupboard', he ponders at how gold idols of gods are kept, noting the central role it plays in religious business. The placement of these idols 'beyond the strips | of stock exchange quotations' (63) is ironic and suggests the profit-driven mindset of insincere priests. Moreover, the narrator's reference to the gods' glance 'from behind slashed editorials' claiming, 'eternal youth' (63) serves as a satirical note on their supposed ability to fulfil such promises for their followers. The examples discussed in this section have thus far explored the narrator's awareness of, and thus detachment from, the hypocrisy and materialism that can be found within institutionalised religions, indicating a desire to explore new ways of understanding the divine. Disconnecting from conventional temple worship, Kolatkar employs the bhakti tradition in *Jejuri* as a way of exploring the spiritual beliefs of his poetic persona and engaging with the rich cultural heritage of India, finding roots to his

personalised, direct, and inclusive approach to spirituality while also contemporising these earlier influences in the pilgrimage journey undertaken by the modern visitor.

Understanding the sacredness of *Jejuri*:

So far, *Jejuri* has demonstrated an anti-caste sentiment by which Kolatkar contemporises the bhakti rejection of the materialistic and ignorant ways of brahman priests and their orthodox religious practices. The narrator's journey through the temple-town thus far suggests that he will find the spiritual outside of the religious institutions that dominate the town. This means he will not leave without experiencing the sacred in some way. Moving forward, it remains unclear to what extent the narrator, who keeps a close eye on every rite proffered inside the temple, will be influenced by the bhakti inclusive and self-decontaminative practices in his attempt to unsettle and realign dominant structures. *Jejuri*'s approach to spirituality differs from the medieval bhakti tradition in some significant ways. In particular, while both encourage individuals to form their connection with the divine or spiritual force without necessarily following specific rituals or practices, bhakti has an intense devotional and emotional aspect directed towards a particular deity. Bhakti emphasises the concept of surrender or complete devotion to a personal deity as a means of liberation, which can sometimes be interpreted as subordination to a higher power. *Jejuri*, on the other hand, suggests a personal connection with the divine that can be found in nature, solitude, and other experiences that evoke a sense of wonder. This is perhaps because, in the world in which Kolatkar lived and wrote, Hari et al., observe that to surrender to a personal deity 'was not just an aberration but also a politically anachronistic virtue'.<sup>179</sup> This was a time when extreme violence was committed 'in the name of God and religion'; therefore, it might have been more

---

<sup>179</sup> Hari et al, p. 153.

necessary for Kolatkar to focus on spirituality that manifests itself in profound engagements with life rather than in God.<sup>180</sup>

Divinity in Kolatkar's poems may appear less overt than the bhakti devotion to a personal god; however, like them, he is willing to discover it in unexpected and unconventional places often overlooked by conventional religious institutions. As the poet himself observes in the second sequence of 'The Railway Station', titled '*the station dog*', the spiritual can be found in the least expected places: 'the spirit of the place | lives inside the mangy body | of the station dog' (70). The dog, described as 'doing penance for the last | three hundred years under | the tree of arrivals and departures' (70), is not merely an ordinary animal but a symbolic fixture of the station, embodying an eternal process of redemption. The implication here is that, like the bhaktas who believed that the spiritual experience could occur anywhere and anytime, Kolatkar's portrayal of divinity transcends the confines of grand temples and revered idols, residing instead in the mundane and overlooked. Similarly, in 'Heart of Ruin', the divine resides in the dilapidated temple of Maruti, which has been excluded from formal worship and is now inhabited by animals. The narrator tells us, 'A mongrel bitch has found a place | for herself and her puppies | in the heart of the ruin. | May be she likes a temple better this way' (44). The temple is in such a crumbling state that the roof is falling down on the head of the god Maruti; yet the narrator observes that 'Nobody seems to mind. | Least of all Maruti himself' (44). It is so peaceful that the mongrel bitch and her puppies find solace and security in its ruins, playing and resting amidst the 'broken tiles' (44). Even the dung beetle finds shelter 'in the broken collection box' (44).

---

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

The narrator displays an openness and sensitivity to the less visible aspects of temple life. This perception leads him to what ostensibly seems a paradoxical conclusion: ‘No more a place of worship this place | is nothing less than the house of god’ (44). Kolatkar again plays on language to convey his bhakti message. He does not include a comma between the two phrases, which allows for a dual interpretation of the narrator’s attitude towards divinity. If we pause the line at ‘this place’, the reading suggests that he is frustrated by the lack of conventional worship in the temple or perhaps making a satirical remark on the decline of religious practices. However, as the line runs, we grasp the distinction the poet makes between the temple as a ‘place of worship’ and a ‘house of god’. Now, he appears more as a mystic who finds god in all forms of life. He refuses worship as a mere synonym of the divine, which obscures the true abundance of life and divinity that exist outside of established institutions. This perspective might stir controversy among certain readers, especially nativists who regard the temple’s traditional practices as fundamental to Indian culture and religion. To them, the narrator’s disinterest in traditional worship may seem disrespectful and unsympathetic. He could be viewed as a westernised, urbanised character who speaks with a detached tourist-like tone. However, it is important to note that although the narrator’s portrayal of divinity challenges the idea that it can only be found within the confines of formal religious institutions and practices, his view of the temple is not meant to be dismissive of its spiritual significance. Instead, Kolatkar suggests that divinity is present in all forms of life, and that one can find it in unexpected and unconventional places. The intense focus on the temple and its animals in *Jejuri*, hence, evokes a subaltern sentiment, similar to that of the bhakti poets who left their castes to experience the divine in its full sublimity. It is true that *Jejuri* presents a vision of divinity that is diffused throughout the natural world, different from the bhakti concentration on a single deity. Despite this difference, both *Jejuri*

and bhakti poetry embrace the ordinary and marginalised world as part of the sacred and assimilate a subversive sensibility that is firmly rooted in the mundane world and everyday reality, inviting readers to reconsider their understanding of divinity and to look beyond the surface-level trappings of religious practice.

This is why, like a bhakti saint, the speaker in the conversational poem ‘Yeshwant Rao’ urges his listeners to disinvest from gods who exploit their followers for personal gain, characterising them as ‘Gods who soak you for your gold. | Gods who soak you for your soul. | Gods who make you walk | on a bed of burning coal’ (64). He warns against investing in these superior divinities, drawing attention to the existence of theological hierarchies even among gods. To illustrate his point, the speaker presents Yeshwant Rao as a marginalised and disabled god who is ‘outside the main temple’ (64) and has no ‘arm’, ‘leg’, or ‘even a single head’ (65). Despite his lowly status, the speaker favours Yeshwant Rao over the more traditionally revered gods, whom he describes as ‘either too symmetrical | or too theatrical’ (64). By elevating Yeshwant and rejecting these superficially impressive deities, the speaker challenges conventional notions of divinity. Kolatkar’s poem thus aligns with the bhakti with its rejection of superficial and extreme forms of worship. He alternatively proposes a more grounded and relatable approach to spirituality, as embodied in Yeshwant Rao’s humility and relatability.

*Jejuri* advocate for a unique perspective on spirituality that emphasise the presence of the divine in the mundane aspects of everyday life. However, it is pertinent to note that the collection does not insist on the sole validity of this perspective; rather, it acknowledges the diversity of voices, dissenting ones included, within the community of pilgrims. Not all pilgrims are interested in the mundane realities of the temple life; some are instead in pursuit of the grandeur aspects of religious spaces. The presence of these differing perspectives

underscores the complexity and richness of the contemporary Hindu culture. One example of this tension between the mundane and the grandeur can be seen in the poem ‘Manohar’. The poem explores the disappointment that can arise when expectations of a religious space are not met. Manohar, a third-person narrator tells us, enters what he believes to be another temple. As he looks inside, he is filled with a sense of anticipation, ‘Wondering | which god he was going to find’ (49). To his surprise, ‘a wide eyed calf | looked back at him’ (49). Realising ‘it’s just a cowshed’, Manohar ‘quickly turned away’ (49), which conveys the sense of disillusionment Manohar has experienced. He had hoped for a transcendent divine presence, but instead, he finds himself confronted with the mundane reality of a cowshed. We know that the poet-narrator would probably have embraced the quotidian aspect of the place. Yet, Kolatkar chooses to illuminate the perspective of another character, which broadens the range of subjectivity within the collection.

Kolatkar’s approach to spirituality, which emphasises inclusivity by subverting rigid, established notions of belief and practice, is reinforced by ‘The Door’. The poem is a contemplation of a door in a temple, which the poet venerates as a divine object. The door is compared to ‘A prophet half brought down | from the cross. | A dangling martyr’ (46), highlighting its significance as a spiritual symbol. The door is also described as ‘heavy’ and ‘medieval’, standing ‘on one hinge alone’ as ‘one hinge broke’ (46). The narrator sees it as a ‘flayed man of muscles who can not find | his way back to an anatomy book’ (46), adding a touch of poetic imagery to the description. The door even leans ‘against | any old doorway to sober up | like the local drunk’ (46), a humorous yet relatable observation that highlights its human-like qualities. Despite its seemingly trivial nature, the door is seen as glorious because, without it, ‘The door would have walked out | long long ago’ (46). Trivialities, hence, are made monumental as the narrator engages with the tiniest of the details of the mundane

aspects of the temple. The poem situates the door in multiple contexts, using a number of cultural references. The poet first registers it as a medieval Hindu door, then identifies it with a Christian trope, and also incorporates it within a modern medical dictionary. Through this approach, Kolatkar again highlights how his poetry is informed by the bhakti tradition by taking his argument against the brahman hegemony beyond just establishing an unrestrained spiritual path. He further dismantles brahmans' exclusivity and their disregard for the openness of the Hindu tradition to other influences, incorporating diverse cultural and religious references to demonstrate the inclusivity and diversity of spirituality. At the same time, he departs from the more particular spatial and temporal situatedness of the bhakti to create a more modern voice and vision, incorporating a more expanded variety of references and vocabulary.

Kolatkar goes further and critiques extreme worship practices and self-torture rituals by expressing his rejection of the idea that physical suffering is necessary for spiritual enlightenment. In 'A Kind of Cross', he particularly critiques the nandi, the holy bull and traditional vehicle of the Lord Siva. It is a humped bull sculpture, which 'sits on a pedestal | in the temple courtyard' (62). Hindu dharma prescribes that one can see the image of the Lord by touching and gazing through the two horns of the nandi. But the narrator, struck by no religious revelation, decides to 'stroke' the bull's 'horn' and sacred 'hump' (62). He is especially appalled by 'a strange instrument of torture' that devotees willingly endure to express their devotion: 'It's a kind of cross that stands on 'a stone platform', supported by 'creaky joints' (62). This instrument, with its 'two cross bars', serves as the site of a ritualistic sacrifice, where 'you lie between and come apart | limb from limb' (62). As the cross bar 'with you on swings around', it creates a sensation that 'Hills and temples dance around' (62). Overhead, constellations spin like 'vultures | in one mad carousel', evoking death (62). The

speaker perceives this ritual as a clear violation of what is legal and morally acceptable. Such violent acts are generally considered ‘illegal’; ‘Except of course, that they don’t’ (62); they are somehow justified in this particular context. The ironic tone in this line reflects Kolatkar’s critique of the hypocrisy and moral ambiguity in certain religious traditions that permit brutality as part of spiritual practice.

Kolatkar’s critique of the crucifixion instrument reflects an open-minded approach to examining religious practices and symbols beyond cultural boundaries. While the cross is primarily associated with Christianity, he highlights its cross-cultural significance as a symbol of torture, rejecting religious rituals and symbols that inflict harm. This cosmopolitan perspective is reflective of the openness of earlier bhakti saint-poets to the diverse religious and cultural influences of their time. By incorporating Christianity, Kolatkar’s cross-cultural symbolism offers a more universally applicable critique of established religious ideologies and practices. Beyond the religious aspect of culture, Kolatkar writes ‘The Doorstep’ in an economic, picturesque manner characteristic of modern Imagist poets, while conveying a bhakti-based recognition of the divine aura omnipresent everywhere, even in ordinary, mundane objects: The poem captures the observation:

That’s no doorstep.

It’s a pillar on its side.

Yes.

That’s what it is (45).

The poem describes a shift from the initial misidentification of the object as a doorstep to the subsequent realisation that it is a pillar, capturing a moment of perceptual clarity that reflects

a deeper, spiritual insight. This poem exemplifies Kolatkar's poetic project of reimagining familiar objects and concepts in ways that unsettle and transform our perception of the world around us. By elevating the doorstep into a 'pillar on its side', the speaker is engaging in a kind of creative, imaginative act that looks for new meanings to emerge from 'the doorstep' when viewed in a different light. While Kolatkar exhibits a bhakti interest in the mystery of ordinary, everyday objects and experiences, and a readiness to look closely and carefully at what might otherwise be dismissed as unimportant or insignificant, he transplants this local spiritual poetics into a modern English poem. Kolatkar's blending of bhakti-based spirituality with the modern Imagist style emphasises how spiritual insights can arise from a reimagining of the commonplace. The blending of these two disparate cultural and temporal contexts highlights the fluidity and dynamism of culture, art, and spirituality. In Kolatkar's poetry, these elements are not rigid or static, but rather transformative and evolving. This, in turn, challenges perspectives that see identity as fixed and exclusive.

#### Exiting Jejuri: transience versus rigidity

The fluidity and evolution of spirituality, tradition, and life in general is at the core of Kolatkar's opposition to the stagnancy governing Khandoba's temple. The poet often presents this deconstructive effect as a clash between the old and the young. 'The Pattern', points out that the rigid checkerboard pattern that must have been drawn by some old men on the back of the twenty-foots tortoise is meaningless for the present generation. The pattern, we are told, 'smudges under the bare feet | and gets fainter all the time as | the children run' (48). The presence of children in *Jejuri* is part of Kolatkar recognition of the transience of life, which can nullify stagnant structures and established traditions or even canons. In 'A Low Temple', he observes children playing on 'the back of the twenty foot tortoise' (47), which is

traditionally placed at the entrance of Hindu temples. They seem careless of its traditional symbolism, which typically images it as a creature capable of retracting its limbs and head within its shell, thereby inspiring worshippers to withdraw their five senses from the material world to appear before the Lord in total purity and submission. This scene is thus significant because it sees in the young children's playfulness a promise to mutate the Hindu mentality that discourages the sensory experience of the divine. Transience and movement are virtues according to Kolatkar's poetry. He delights in registering the transition brought about by the passage of time, movement, or, as in this poem, the prospect of change seen in children. The recognition of the transient, ephemeral nature of life and its effect on dogmas is also valued in bhakti philosophy, as echoed in the words of the twelfth-century saint-poet Basava: "Things standing shall fall; but the Moving ever shall stay".<sup>181</sup> This is perhaps why we feel that the narrator teases the child-guide in 'The Priest's Son', pushing him into questioning the stable narrative of the five hills around Jejuri, which were believed to stand for the five demons killed by Khandoba. The child was telling the story to the visitors when the narrator interrupted to ask him if he really believes in it. The young boy does not reply 'but merely looks uncomfortable | shrugs and looks away' (52). However, the little boy 'happens to notice | a quick wink of a movement': 'look | there's a butterfly | there' (52).

It is in the intention of the narrator to shed light on the fact that such a story should be preserved and repeated for the sake of livelihood. In his view, Jejuri has become more important as a place of commercial gains than devotion; therefore, the child's use of Khandoba's legends could render him an asset in the economic transaction his father-priest receives. However, the boy's reluctance could also be an indication of his doubt about the

---

<sup>181</sup> qtd in A. K. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, p. 1.

authenticity of the story and, more importantly, his attention and sensitivity to the divine in the natural vitality of life, symbolised by the moving butterfly. This scene inspires the narrator, who, like the boy, savours the moment. Unlike the mythical history of Khandoba, the butterfly, the narrator explains, has ‘no story behind it’; ‘It is pinned down to no past’; ‘It has no future’ (52). The butterfly exists only in the immediacy of the present, but it is also in flux; ‘It is split like a second’ (52). It has two parts, but ‘hinges around itself’ (52). Therefore, even without the aid of myths or religious grand narratives, it makes to the narrator a monumental presence by which this ‘little yellow butterfly’ takes ‘these wretched hills | under its wings’ (53). At one point, the yellow butterfly camouflages in the auspicious golden turmeric powder, which the worshippers spread in temples to adorn their gods. It appears like ‘Just a pinch of yellow, | it opens before it closes | and close | before it o | where is it’ (53). Jahan Ramazani considers the protagonist’s encounter with the butterfly a major spiritual moment, emphasising that ‘its disappearance is registered in a visual and verbal pun’.<sup>182</sup> He suggests that

[t]he “o” suspended at line’s and stanza’s end is the “o” of the broken word “open,” the “O” of poetic vocative, the “oh” of astonishment, and the 0 (zero) of absence – all of which are summoned in the playful enjambment and the elided syllable “-pens”, an omission that, while verbally, semantically, and visually enacting openness, silently speaks the poet’s pen.<sup>183</sup>

The butterfly’s disappearance, to my mind, also illustrates the prevailing sense throughout the collection that it is the trivial that makes the monumental possible and that both are governed

---

<sup>182</sup> Jahan Ramazani, ‘Poetry and Tourism in a Global Age’, in *Poetry in a Global Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 96.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

by the transience of life. This dialectic, in turn, suggests that time can dissolve the precarious structures of the monumental into the trivial, and vice versa. Elsewhere in the collection, the dynamism and vitality of natural life are contrasted with the stagnation of petrified religious traditions that have lost their connection to the divine. In ‘Between Jejuri and the Railway Station’, the protagonist leaves the temple town, reflecting that its ‘three hundred pillars, five hundred steps, eighteen arches and the sixty-three priests’ (67) did not move him as much as the harvest dance of ‘a dozen of cocks and hens’ in ‘a field of jowar’ (67). This dance symbolises the divine life force that still exists in Jejuri but is overshadowed by its ruins and commercialisation. M. K. Naik insightfully comments on the broader significance of this encounter, noting that ‘[t]hese cocks and hens evidently represent a value system older than both ancient religious tradition and modern industrial civilization’.<sup>184</sup> It is, according to him, the life principle that predates both civilization and tradition and contrasts both in that ‘it has a vigour and an energy, a joy and a gusto. a spontaneity and a freedom sadly lacking in both the other’.<sup>185</sup> The harvest dance of cocks and hens, like the flying butterfly, the mongrel puppies, and the temple rat, has no tradition nor rationale behind it. It is life distilled to its purest elements, untouched by the decay and fossilisation of human-made systems.

In addition to natural dynamism, the sun constantly reminds us that change is inevitable. At the outset of this pilgrimage, the influence of the rising sun altered the bus’s direction, marking a moment that allowed the narrator to perceive spirituality beyond restrictive conventions. The sun also emerged as a source of reassurance for the narrator on his journey toward enlightenment, especially when he stepped outside the temple after his encounter with the ignorant priest. Now, as he waits for a train to leave the temple town, the setting sun

---

<sup>184</sup> Madhukar Krishna Naik, *Dimensions of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1984), p. 31.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

symbolises the ongoing evolution of life, reinforcing the theme of perpetual change. In the closing poem of *Jejuri*, titled ‘*the setting sun*’, the sun is described as gently touching the horizon, ‘large as a wheel’ (72). The symbolism of the sun as a representation of perpetual motion and change has significant implications for Kolatkar’s approach to medieval bhakti. Like the vast and dynamic wheel of the sun, the bhakti tradition is expansive and ever-evolving. Kolatkar’s return to bhakti themes and styles is not characterised by repetition or redundancy. Instead, it conveys a sense of freshness and adaptability, making it relevant to a contemporary context and accessible in a global language. The adaptability of bhakti highlights its enduring significance for audiences worldwide.

## Conclusion

In ‘Making Love to a Poem’, Kolatkar shares his thoughts about writing an English poem while embodying Indian sensibilities, questioning whether it reflects a

cultural schizophrenia

creative schizophrenia split personality

[...]

whether I present one profile in one language

and another profile in the other

[...]

stealing the secrets of one language and selling them to the other

and vice versa

[...]

whether the 2 sides of my creative personality

[...]

run into each other

to form a single continuous surface

[...]

why have I been digging my grave in 2 cemeteries

a trick I learnt from Kabir.<sup>186</sup>

These lines speak to how Kolatkar has interpreted and participated in the cohesive discourse of bhakti – cohesive because its shared thesis devalues uniformity, institutionalisation, and rigidity in favour of individuality, unorthodoxy, and a movability to ‘run into’ other sources and influences in the aim to ‘form a single continuous surface’. Kolatkar inherited a single, massive bhakti movement to which he contributed with his English poetry about the temple-town *Jejuri*. He did not just revive a traditional bhakti devotional vision; there was no imperative for him to undertake such a revival simply because he could capitalise on the individualism of the bhakti, adding to it without resorting to mere imitation or restoration. In this sense, his use of English instead of a local regional language, his infusion of modernist attitudes and techniques instead of drawing from the Tamil and Sanskrit literatures that the medieval bhakti poets imbibed, and his integration and critique of non-Hindu religions such as Christianity instead of the medieval bhakti poets’ focus on Buddhism and Jainism – these forms of ‘reworking’ should be perceived neither as ‘foreign’ nor motivated by a desire to appease foreign sensibilities. Instead, much like his predecessors, Kolatkar created a distinctive whole bhakti that suited the tempo-spatial context, socio-political climate, and the individual religious and cultural sensibilities of the protagonist of *Jejuri*. By contemporising the spirit of bhakti saint-poets in modern English poetry, Kolatkar’s *Jejuri* pushes the boundaries of culture, language, and literature. As he

---

<sup>186</sup> Kolatkar, *Collected Poems in English*, pp. 349-350.

navigated the complexities of post-independence India, his purpose was to afford a nonessentialist narrative that emphasises the internal diversity of India and its receptivity to external influences, while also presenting himself as a part of a dynamic and evolving spiritual and literary tradition.

## Chapter Two: Seamus Heaney: A Northen Locality at The Troubles

here is a space  
again, the scone rising  
to the tick of two clocks.<sup>1</sup>

‘Sunlight’ from *North* (1975)

In these lines from the first dedicatory poem in his volume *North*, entitled ‘Mossbawn: Sunlight’, Heaney depicts his aunt, Mary, baking on a sun-drenched afternoon, situated in dual time. She patiently sits, watching for ‘the scone rising’ in a space wherein things operate according to ‘the tick of two clocks’. Mary, as remembered by the poet, is a bridge between two disparate time zones, the past and the present, synchronizing with them both. This convergence of time is further accentuated by the quickening, alliterative, and enjambled lines that underscore the fluidity of time within the ‘here’ of this domestic setting, although briefly interrupted by a comma to perhaps indicate a short break between history and freshly baked memories. The rising of the scone carries an inescapable symbolism within the context of Irish history, hinting at a political rising. The recurrence of such events, both the literal ‘scone rising’ and the metaphorical political upheaval, is suggested by the word ‘again’, which, while momentarily paused by the same comma, foreshadows an outbreak of another episode of the violence that characterises both past and present in *North*. The second dedicatory poem, ‘The Seed Cutters’, similarly blurs the boundaries of space and time. Two distinct eras overlap as contemporary farmworkers ‘seem hundreds of years away’, so much so that the painter Pieter Brueghel would approve Heaney’s description of them: ‘Brueghel, | You’ll know them if I can get them true’ (xi). The blending of past and present becomes more seamless, with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001; first publ. 1975), p. x.

seed cutters, much like Mary in ‘Sunlight’, aligning themselves with an elusive sense of time, that of the cyclical ‘calendar customs’ of the agricultural year. Even in this cycle of history, violence lurks nearby, as the farmworkers have ample ‘time to kill’, and their knives remain ‘sharp’ (xi). In these lines, the toil of farming is equated with the act of killing, hinting at a potent juxtaposition that Heaney will revisit throughout *North*.

In this chapter, I argue that the local evoked by Heaney in *North* is a complex construct. It is tied to a specific time and space, but also heavily overlaid with mythologies and traditions from various sources, including Danish, Nordic, Celtic, Classical, and Christian. While the Troubles make the primary contextual backdrop of this volume, the dynamic setting within it accommodates a multitude of kinships and voices, including Heaney’s Catholic side, the Protestant neighbours, and even the British viewpoint, among other varying perspectives. Heaney captures this diversity by reaching back in time to evoke the archetypal Iron Age bog sacrificial rituals as well as occasionally evoking the historical presence of Viking invaders, the enduring influence of Greco-Roman civilisations, and other contemporary resonating references. His poetic approach involves a dynamic zooming in and out of the immediacy of the Troubles, a transformative ‘reworking’ that breathes new life into this elemental resourceful past and makes it relevant to the present. His political purpose, I argue, is unmistakable: to avoid a one-sided perspective. While naturally anchored in his Catholic identity, Heaney offers a narrative of the conflict that is not bound by simplistic binaries, embracing the complexities of Northern Ireland’s history and geography. His artistic purpose, in my view, could easily be misunderstood; he strives to position his art at a slight aesthetic distance while ensuring it remains ethically accountable in addressing the brutality of the Troubles. With a transcendent lyrical distance from his politically tense subject matter, Heaney hopes to avoid propagandist ideological and sectarian biases. At the same time, he

negotiates the ability of the aesthetic poetry to address atrocity without overly aestheticizing or glorifying violence and suffering or the indifferent impartiality of journalistic tone. Here, it should be noted that the tension between the ethical and aesthetic is twofold in my argument about Heaney. On one hand, it involves navigating the line between beauty and brutality, and on the other, between poetic and unpoetic forms of expression – that is, between the symbolic and rhetorical means of the lyrical, and the direct political and stenographic-journalistic styles. Heaney managed to walk both tightropes to a remarkable extent, as evident in the words of the Nobel Prize awarding committee in 1995, which commended his combination of ‘lyrical beauty and ethical depth that elevates everyday miracles and the living past’.<sup>2</sup>

While Heaney clearly harks back to his upbringing in the specific locality of Mossbawn, in both its spatial and temporal merits, a wider northern realm remains his mainstay. As underlined by the publisher’s description of *North*, Heaney’s ‘idea of the north’ encapsulates ‘a vision of Ireland, its people, history and landscape’... ‘refracted through images drawn from different parts of the Northern European experience’.<sup>3</sup> On the publishers’ reading, this unique lens allows Heaney to examine the violence on ‘his home ground in relation to memories of the Scandinavian and English invasions which have marked Irish history so indelibly’.<sup>4</sup> Read in this spirit, Heaney’s *North* emerges not purely from one immediate locality demarcated by the geographical and chronological confines of Northern Ireland’s sectarian division in the latter half of the twentieth century. Rather, it weaves a complex sense of place that merges the present with more distant times and horizons, forming a compounded locality interwoven within the vast terrains and layered history of the north. In fact, the poems in *North* can be

---

<sup>2</sup> The Nobel Prize in Literature 1995, NobelPrize.org, Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2024, <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/summary/>> [accessed 4 Mar 2024].

<sup>3</sup> *North*, the inside cover.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

seen as building upon the earth as a transfigured entity emptied of its former state. This is exemplified in the eponymous poem ‘North’, a title he chose carefully to convey a perceptual sense of the north as a region transcending both spatial and temporal specificity, making it the fitting title for the entire collection. Notably, Heaney discarded alternative working titles, such as ‘North Atlantic’ and ‘Northerners’, in favour of ‘North’ because it strikes a balance between specificity and generality, in contrast to the former, which is ‘too vague’, and the latter, which is excessively ‘specific and anthropocentric’, as argued by Rand Brandes.<sup>5</sup>

In the opening stanza of ‘North’, Heaney, taking on the role of the speaker, appears to be alone, standing on ‘a long strand, | the hammered shod of a bay’, by the ‘Atlantic’ Ocean (10). This return is not just physical, but also metaphorical, transporting him back to a time when ‘the Atlantic’ had only ‘secular | powers’ (10), devoid of its religious and historical significance. Having signalled attachment and familiarity to this primal coastal setting, Heaney begins to wander further away from local geography, gazing northward towards the ‘unmagical’ landfalls of ‘Iceland’ and ‘pathetic colonies | of Greenland’ (10). These isolated lands appear unmagical, but a charge ‘suddenly’ emerges as he recalls the cultural outgoingness known to the ‘fabulous’ Viking ‘raiders’, who, through their incursions, connected land from the north Scottish Island ‘Orkney’ to Ireland in the south where they found ‘Dublin’ (10). Time has passed, and they now rest in their ‘stone ships’ and ‘thawed streams’, with ‘their long swords rusting’ (10). Heaney takes notice of their ‘ocean-deafened voices’, which rise above the sound of thunder, warning him of ‘violence and epiphany’ (10). The Viking longship, a symbol of their exploration and conquest, also floats. As with the voices of the raiders, its ‘tongue’, ‘buoyant with hindsight’, tells of their maritime adventures,

---

<sup>5</sup> Rand Brandes, ‘Seamus Heaney’s Working Titles: From “Advancements of Learning” to “Midnight Anvil”’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. Bernard O’Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 23.

of the swing of ‘Thor’s hammer’, which shaped geography and trade and caused ‘thick-witted couplings and revenges’ (10). It speaks of ‘the hatreds and behindbacks | of the althing’, of tales of ‘lies and women’, of weariness eventually leading to ‘peace’, and of memories preserving ‘the spilled blood’ (11). Heaney uses this evocation of the Vikings, it appears, to suggest the lingering impact of their history, culture, spirituality and social and political lifestyles in the contemporary reality of Northern Ireland. As Heather O’Donoghue argues, the mention of ‘the Icelandic word althing’ highlights the democratic and legal institution of medieval Iceland, which, contrary to expectations, is not ‘strange or exotic’; rather, ‘it was a precociously and precariously democratic parliamentary and legal institution’ that, as revealed through the study of saga literature, ‘we can compare with our own’.<sup>6</sup> O’Donoghue thus notes that while it may be unsettling to include ‘the exotic brutal raiders in one’s national history’, the striking parallels between ‘saga society and the domestic violence of the Ulster troubles’ present even greater disquiet.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, Heaney’s first mention of the Vikings in *North* recognises them as an integral part of Irish history, notwithstanding their historical reputation as hostile raiders and conquerors. In ‘Belderg’, the narrative centres on Heaney’s encounter with someone who appears to be a local archaeologist, the discoverer of Neolithic quern-stones in the bogs of the eponymous small village. These historical artifacts, the archaeologist duly notes, keep ‘turning up | And were thought of as foreign’ (4); each stone’s hole gives it a unique appearance, reminiscent of a ‘One-eyed’ creature, but, unlike the monstrous Cyclops of classical mythology, one with a ‘benign’ presence (4). The discussion eventually leads to a profound investigation into

---

<sup>6</sup> Heather O’Donoghue, ‘Heaney, Beowulf and the Medieval Literature of the North’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. Bernard O’Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 195.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

language. The crux of the matter revolves around the etymology of ‘Mossbawn’ – described as ‘my old home’s music’ (5). The interlocutor highlights the ‘older strains of Norse’ of the first part of the word ‘*moss*’, meaning bog in Danish and Icelandic (5). The poet-speaker, however, seems unprepared to acknowledge this Nordic influence on Irish language and culture. Instead, he hastily points out how he ‘could derive | A forked root from that ground’ (5). The second part ‘*bawn*’, he clarifies, could either be of Irish origin – ‘Persistent if outworn’ – or refer to an ‘English fort, | A planter’s walled-in mound’ (5). The other speaker again gently persists, ‘But the Norse ring on your tree’ (5), finally granting the poet a perspective beyond the double English and Irish origin of the word.

Heaney falls in a sudden moment of epiphany and envisions ‘A world-tree of balanced stones’, with ‘Querns piled like vertebrae’, and ‘The marrow crushed to grounds’ (5). This imagery brings to mind the Old Norse mythology of the world tree, Yggdrasill, which serves as the centre of an imaginary cosmos, sustaining the world and its inhabitants. Hence, as Una Creedon-Carey’s insightful interpretation of this stanza reveals, this visionary moment enables Heaney to consider the entirety of language as a stable ‘world-tree’, where ‘individual tongues (“Querns piled like vertebrae”) are indistinguishable’.<sup>8</sup> The smallest linguistic units, represented by the lexical ‘marrow’, disintegrate into the ground, thereby the speaker becomes like ‘grist’ dissolved in ‘an ancient mill’.<sup>9</sup> This holistic view of language surpasses mere recognition of the dual lineage of the word ‘bawn’ between English and Irish. It, furthermore, signifies the poet-speaker’s realisation that the local setting of Mossbawn is deeply intertwined with other cultures, eras, and languages. Ultimately, through this

---

<sup>8</sup> Una A. Creedon-Carey, ‘The Whole Vexed Question: Seamus Heaney, Old English, and Language Troubles’ (Oberlin College: Digital Commons at Oberlin, 2015), p. 26, <<https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/257>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

dismantling of linguistic and cultural purity, he accepts that the Vikings, often viewed ‘as a deplorable but mercifully transient plague on Irish society’, are an integral part of Irish history, even if this acceptance entails encompassing their violence as well, a perspective with which O’Donoghue concurs.<sup>10</sup>

In his scholarly account of the contentious discourse surrounding the Vikings’ history in Ireland, Thomas Heffernan reminds us that successive generations of Irish schoolchildren ‘were taught to see the Vikings as marauders and nothing else’; yet archaeological work at sites such as Wood Quay in Dublin unveils an alternative face of the Viking presence: one of civilisation and artisanship.<sup>11</sup> Heffernan then raises the question, ‘[w]hich is the real Viking?’ and his answer is unequivocally both.<sup>12</sup> Heaney’s ‘Viking Dublin’ contemplates this duality. The poem begins with a description of the intriguing artifacts and remnants excavated from the Norse settlement at Wood Quay, which suggest a more creative aspect of the Viking culture beyond mere violence. Resembling ‘trial pieces’ of a larger puzzle, these crafted fragments include complex patterns that look like ‘a cage | or trellis’ that are ‘improvised on bone: | foliage, bestiaries’ (12), creating ‘interlacings elaborate | as the netted routes | of ancestry and trade’ (13). The Vikings, according to Heaney, are sophisticated both in craftsmanship and in engagement with cultural and trade exchanges; one reflects the other. The Vikings’ presence in Northern Ireland is a factor in its integration into a broader northern territory characterised by both atavistic brutality and aesthetic allure. Yet, the poet’s reverence for the artistry and prowess of these Norsemen does not obscure the darker facets of their historical record. Heaney invites his readers to ‘Come fly with me, | come sniff the wind |

---

<sup>10</sup> O’Donoghue, p. 193.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Farel Heffernan, *Wood Quay: The Clash Over Dublin’s Viking Past* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

with the expertise | of the Vikings -' (14) who are described as capable of both killing and cunning negotiation, as 'hoarders of grudges and gain', all while displaying a 'neighbourly' and 'scoretaking' disposition (15). This characterisation captures the duality of the Vikings in Northern Ireland, oscillating between a civilised, diplomatic, and skilled trading society and a malevolent marauding one.

More strikingly, Heaney suggests that even amidst their acts of violence, the Vikings found aesthetic if disturbing ways of expression that reflect their complex worldview, as demonstrated in the following stanza, where the metre itself mirrors this intricacy:

With a **butchers aplomb**

they **spread** out your **lungs**

and **made** you **warm wings**

for your **shoulders** (15).

These lines paint the gruesome image of 'blood-eagling', an Old Nordic practice in which the lungs of a dead body are excavated and arranged as wings. The stanza is written in a flexible metre that usually has two beats to the line, with variations in the number of unstressed syllables enabling variations in momentum and tone. This metrical flexibility helps us to hear a discordancy between the rather sing-song rhythm of the first two lines and the image they offer, suggesting that the Vikings were not only barbaric killers but also spiritualists and artists in their dark ways. They demonstrated both the composure of butchers and the precision of sculptors as they sought to craft the remains of their enemies into what O'Donoghue remarks as 'pagan sculptures' to appease 'Óðinn, the Norse god of battle

associated with carrion birds like eagles and ravens'.<sup>13</sup> This chilling juxtaposition perplexes Heaney because it blurs the lines between savagery and aesthetics and spirituality. In a plea, therefore, he invokes these ancient forefathers in the hope that they can explain the complexities and contradictions that marked their own era in history – and continue to resonate in the 1970s: 'Old fathers, be with us. | Old cunning assessors | of feuds and of sites | for ambush or town' (15). This resonance is particularly tied to the demographic and religious divisions of the Troubles, especially since Heaney's portrayal of the Vikings, as O'Donoghue rightly observes, transforms them from external aggressors into 'drearly familiar wrongdoers', rendering their actions profoundly 'suggestive of contemporary urban conflict'.<sup>14</sup> The neighbourly nature of grudges, marauding, hostility, violence, and the eerie aesthetics of rituals and revenge, all rooted in the historical context of the past, become emblematic thematic motifs in Heaney's take on the Troubles. When Heaney later encounters the bog bodies somewhere else in *North*, such thematic motifs will resurface to similarly reflect on the Troubles, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

Heaney's recontextualization of the history of the Viking invaders, changing the way they are traditionally perceived as outsiders and giving them a different, more neighbourly characterisation to shed light on the complexities of the Troubles exemplifies what I term a reworking of local materials. As I now turn my analytical focus to his series of bog poems, I aim to provide a more detailed illustration of the reworkings he employs and their purposes. I argue that, similar to his treatment of the Vikings' history, Heaney's engagement with the societal, spiritual, and ritualistic sources of the Iron Age bog legacy draws upon its non-exclusively Irish spatiotemporal attributes. These attributes lay the foundation for the

---

<sup>13</sup> O'Donoghue, p. 194.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

conjunction of a historically and geographically liminal space so as to escape easy classification. In this space, I argue, neat dichotomies between republican and unionist, Catholic and Protestant, coloniser and colonised, Irish and British, historical and contemporary, give way to more pluralistic and potentially indeterminate viewpoints. This approach reflects the territory's unique status as both a settler colony, which contributes to these binary divisions, and as a land culturally, historically, and geographically connected with the British metropole and other Northern European countries, which complicates these binaries. This inclusivity, nevertheless, does not conform to restrictive nativist, and narrowly political, interpretations often fixated on pigeonholing him or identifying whether he leans towards one side more than the other. I contend that interpreting Heaney's poems through these narrow paradigms is a perilous approach that risks distorting his ethical and aesthetic intentions.

Implicit in these approaches, I argue, is a tendency to assume that the poet merely retells history, glossing over the differences between two geographically and historically distant cultures. By focusing too heavily on the political dimensions, I suggest, such readings neglect the literary and textual subtleties of the poetry – that is, the way in which Heaney reworks and recontextualises elements of the past. This insufficient attention to the text culminates in a problematic assertion: that the poet suggests that contemporary Northern Ireland merely repeats an earlier historical trajectory, the past perpetuating its influence on contemporary conflicts. This is an oversight that, in turn, leads to misinterpretations of Heaney's tone and intentions, portraying him as insufficiently political, an essentialist who views sectarian murder as endemic in the north, or, worse, a covert propagandist who glorifies sectarian violence. I will elaborate on these views in my examination of critical receptions later in this

chapter, as I revisit readings of figures like Ciaran Carson, David Lloyd, Henry Hart, and Patricia Coughlan.

I argue that to assume a ready continuity between two geographically and historically distant contexts without acknowledging the poet's textual reworkings amounts to a fallacy. While Heaney admittedly relies on the Danish archaeologist P. V. Glob's descriptions of the bog people, he regularly alters the sequence of narratives. Therefore, any continuity that is inferred is manipulated, nonsequential, and perhaps even fictitious. As the close readings that conclude the chapter will illustrate, Heaney does not limit his referential field to Northern European Iron Age civilization, but swiftly conflates a mixture of iconographs and registers, including Christological and national Irish ones. These shifts in narrative and chronology are important if we are to grasp that while Heaney's poetry acknowledges that what unfolds in Northern Ireland is yet another chapter of violence in the region, it does not present violence as a mere repetition or inherent to the place or its people. Instead, he uses the remote past as a starting point to address the contemporary violence through a layered sense of the local that evades succumbing to divisive narratives.

To avoid misinterpreting the bog poems, we should closely examine them by first considering the historical, cultural, and political contexts they encompass. In this case, our contextual understanding is informed by Glob's account of the bog people, the unique historical and geographical position of Northern Ireland, and Heaney's own biographical perspective on the politically tense situation and poetry. I will first set the stage for the analysis by examining the broader context of the Troubles, seeking to navigate it as a multifaceted interplay of contemporary binary affiliations inextricably interwoven with the profound historical and geographical underpinnings of the 'north' as a region. I will then proceed with an overview of the immediate context of Heaney, illuminating his place in and attitude towards these

complex dynamics. I will follow with an examination of the social, spiritual, and ritualistic legacy of the bogs, as elucidated by Glob, and its significance in sectarian Northern Ireland and Heaney's emblematic approach to the Troubles. An overview of critical reception will precede the final close readings section, with the aim to reassess how Heaney's bog poems have been interpreted or misinterpreted, especially given his deliberate refusal to conform to binary categorisations. I will conclude the chapter with a close analysis of his attempt to weave a broad range of historical references, all part of a north locality that enables him to be in two minds, embracing the complexities and paradoxes of Northern Ireland's past and modern reality.

### **Northern Ireland, a British colony in the North of Europe?**

In Heaney's *North*, the Troubles are not simplified as a mere twentieth-century conflict between two divides. Rather, they represent a window into the complex interplay of contemporary affiliations emerging from the geographical and historical experience of the north as a region. This narrative of Northern Ireland is a microcosm of the broader postcolonial discourse, which debates its liminal, somewhat paradoxical nature, which resembles a colony while sharing cultural common ground with Northern Europe. Situated on the island of Ireland, Northern Ireland is, on one hand, perceived as a settler colony, where the historical demographic and cultural schism between the Catholic and Protestant communities engendered profound social, political, and religious tensions, ultimately culminating in the Troubles. On the other hand, it defies a straightforward postcolonial classification because of its historical, geographical, and cultural ties with Britain and the wider Northern European context, which has resulted in the formation of fluid, dual, and intertwined identities and alliances that resist clear-cut binaries. While Northern Ireland has endured a long-term

colonial experience marked by both subjugation and resistance, its government and some of its inhabitants have also, at times, collaborated with and benefited from British imperial expansion. Conquered and conqueror, other and white, marginalised and dominant, Catholic and Protestant, the thinning line between these distinctions has converged within the borders of the territory, foregrounding Heaney's inclusive take on the Troubles.

The complex colonial history of Ireland, with Northern Ireland as one of its integral components, is characterised by a prolonged period of subjugation to British military, political, and cultural dominance, countered by a remarkable struggle for national independence that eventually led to the emergence of Ireland as the first decolonised nation in the twentieth century, albeit not entirely. Since the sixteenth century, Ireland had been effectively under English, and later British, control as a colony until the early twentieth century. Starting as early as 1534, when Henry VIII assumed direct control over Irish lordship, a title he later changed to 'king' of Ireland in 1541, the island was subject to intractable and bitter colonial practices including land confiscation, displacement of indigenous populations, exploitation of resources, and attempts to impose English culture and governance on newly acquired territories.<sup>15</sup> Rebellions, both from the Gaelic Irish and Anglo-Irish, were repeatedly suppressed, significant Anglo-Irish territories were dismantled, and in certain regions, the lands of defeated rebels were confiscated and replaced with 'loyal subjects' under state supervision.<sup>16</sup> There was a continuous back-and-forth between attempts at reconciliation and the use of force.<sup>17</sup> In some extensive areas, for instance, land titles were reestablished through 'peaceful arrangement between the crown and the occupying people'.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> T. W. Moody, 'Introduction: Early Modern Ireland', in *A New History of Ireland: Early Modern Ireland 1534-1691* (Oxford, 2009; online, Oxford Academic, 3 Oct. 2011), p. xii, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199562527.003.0024.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. xi.

The seventeenth century saw some major changes as Ireland became part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain under the Act of Union of 1801. During this period of official union, the Irish were not only permitted a good deal of self-government, being represented by their ‘own members of parliament in Westminster’, but also formed ‘a major recruiting ground for the British imperial service’ and thus were participants in subjugating non-white indigenous people of faraway British colonies.<sup>19</sup> The nineteenth century witnessed a growing movement for Irish home rule, culminating in political and religious uprisings in the early twentieth century, including the Easter Rising of 1916 and the War of Independence in 1919, which concluded with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1922. This treaty not only marked the end of the Union but also led to the establishment of the Irish Free State in the south, achieved through the partition of the North. As a result, six counties remained part of the Union to form Northern Ireland, leaving the Catholic minority to grapple with the enduring effects of colonialism and the long-lasting consequences of religious and ethnic discrimination that had developed over centuries. This tense situation escalated into a violent armed sectarian and political conflict known as the Troubles (1969-1998), pitting Catholics (mostly republicans) against Protestants (mostly unionists) in Northern Ireland.

This outline of specific episodes in what is a very distinctive colonial history may present Ireland as a paradigmatic case of colonialism. It stands out as one of the earliest British colonies to endure oppression and, subsequently, as a pioneer in decolonisation during the twentieth century. This makes Ireland’s postcolonial experience comparable, if not exemplary, to other former colonies. As Elleke Boehmer argues, the Irish ‘resistance struggle

---

<sup>19</sup> Joe Cleary, ‘Postcolonial Writing in Ireland’, in A. Quayson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 541

was in certain other colonies taken as talismanic by nationalist movements'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly,

Robert Young writes:

The forms of revolutionary and cultural activism developed by the Irish against the entrenched self-interest of its rule by the British aristocracy and bourgeoisie meant that it remained the standard bearer for all anti-colonial movements in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries...[Ireland] provided a model for the most effective combination of tactics for all future anti-colonial struggle aside from those dependent entirely on military insurrection.<sup>21</sup>

The opposite route can too be valid as a basis for comparisons between Ireland and other colonies given that, as Joe Cleary notes, it has gone through a complex of colonial structures, legacies, and dilemmas, 'many of which have also occurred, in variant forms obviously, in other former colonies across the world'.<sup>22</sup> This comparative perspective allows literary critics to place the Irish case in a broader postcolonial context, offering insightful readings of works from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Irish Literary Revival to the Northern Irish Troubles in the latter half of the twentieth century. Edward Said, for instance, characterises W. B. Yeats as 'a great national poet who during a period of anti-imperialist resistance articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the vision of a people suffering

---

<sup>20</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. 302.

<sup>22</sup> Joe Cleary, 'Postcolonial Ireland', in Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire, Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; online edn, Oxford Academic, 3 Oct. 2011), p. 253, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199251841.003.0009.

under the dominion of an offshore power'.<sup>23</sup> Said likens Yeats's role to similar nativist movements that emerged in response to colonial encounters, such as negritude.<sup>24</sup> More recently, Jahan Ramazani has argued that Yeats's 'anticolonial denunciations of Britain's efforts to exterminate the Irish and obliterate its indigenous culture' position him as 'no less "postcolonial"' than so-called Third World writers like Achebe, Brathwaite, or Rushdie.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, reducing the Anglo-Irish relation into a typical coloniser-colonised position is very problematic considering the technicalities of the Act of Union together with the ongoing annexation of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom. Regardless of assertions such as Declan Kiberd's that 'the Irish experience seems to anticipate that of the emerging nation-states of the so-called "Third World"',<sup>26</sup> Ireland's protracted engagement with British colonialism and its complicity with the British imperial enterprise is difficult to ignore. In particular, Stephen Howe, in his polemical work *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (2002), questions the suitability of colonial interpretations of Irish history not only by asserting Ireland's complicities with the British Empire but also by emphasising its resemblances to the broader European context. Howe argues that Ireland's incorporation into Britain 'involved ever-varying, but always significant, elements of consent and cooperation, of seemingly willing Irish assimilation to what were originally English, then in some measure syncretically British, institutions and cultural patterns'.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Edward Said, 'Yeats and Decolonization', in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward W. Said, introduction by Seamus Deane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>25</sup> Jahan Ramazani, 'Is Yeats a Postcolonial Poet?' in *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford, 2002; online, Oxford Academic, 3 Oct. 2011), p. 230, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199249909.001.0001.

Howe, thus, expresses scepticism about nationalist views of Irish history that equate the republican struggle with an anti-colonialist national liberation movement; these nationalist interpretations of Irish history, he argues, ‘have been in the form of rather superficial sloganising, with little serious attempt to trace the relationships between the Irish situation and either anticolonial movements elsewhere or global theories of imperialism’.<sup>28</sup> He critiques historians who, in his view, underestimate the complexity of Ireland’s relationship with the British Empire, failing to provide a sophisticated comparative perspective that integrates Ireland into wider international contexts by applying simplistic analogies with Asia and Africa at the expense of more useful comparisons with other European states, especially those that, like Ireland, gained independence just after the First World War.<sup>29</sup> He also critiques cultural theorists and literary critics such as Edward Said, Seamus Deane, Declan Kiberd, and Luke Gibbons who, in his argument, adopt colonial models to interpret the Irish experience without considering the usefulness of history and rely instead on literary criticism as an explanatory tool ‘to stand in for those of historical, social, and economic analysis’.<sup>30</sup> As a consequence, such accounts end up attributing a vast range of historical phenomena to colonialism, treating it as a ‘homogeneous and all-powerful’ term: ‘[c]alling all these sorts of things ‘colonial’ systematically denies or underrates historical variety, complexity and heterogeneity’.<sup>31</sup>

Howe is right in pointing out the complexity of Irish colonial history and its integration into the broader British and European contexts. However, his generalisation that Irish incorporation into Britain involved elements of consent and cooperation wrongly elides the

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 108-109.

substantial distinctions between Catholic Irish and Protestant Irish. In addition to this, his uncritical suggestion that postcolonial critics consider Ireland's relation to Britain to be 'exactly the same as that of all Britain's African, Asian, or Caribbean colonies' appears paradoxical. This is because, while condemning critics for underrating historical variety, complexity, and heterogeneity, Howe fails to acknowledge that the British Empire comprised a heterogeneous collection of 'trade colonies, Protectorates, Crown colonies, settlement colonies, administrative colonies, Mandates, trade ports, naval bases, Dominions, and dependencies'.<sup>32</sup> This oversight downplays postcolonial critics' well-established understanding of the complex, heterogeneous nature of colonisation and decolonisation, as emphasised by Anne McClintock's observation that '[d]ifferent forms of colonialization have [...] given rise to different forms of de-colonization' and Cleary's argument that 'a wide diversity of colonial situations can exist even within a single Empire'.<sup>33</sup> Howe also goes wrong in assuming a generic postcolonial framework, since, in most cases, the fundamental predicate of including Ireland in debates about colonialism and postcolonialism is not that Ireland provides coherent comparisons in terms of history, culture, and experience with other colonies, but that its mixed position in relation to the British Empire, its complicity and subjugation, 'complicate, extend and in some cases expose the limits of current models of postcoloniality'.<sup>34</sup> In postcolonial literary criticism, it is important to emphasise that Ireland is by no means taken for granted within a generic, 'homogenous' postcolonial model. This is to say that, while one can argue that Ireland shares colonial structures with other former colonies, many postcolonialists would still contend that it remains, to a distressing extent,

---

<sup>32</sup> As listed by Cleary, 'Postcolonial Ireland', p. 253.

<sup>33</sup> Anne McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism',' *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), p. 88, doi:10.2307/466219; Cleary, 'Postcolonial Ireland', p. 253.

<sup>34</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, p. 5.

more historically integrated within Britain than any other former colony of the British Empire in Africa, West Indies, Asia, or the Middle East.

It is not only the history of Anglo-Irish complicity that set Ireland apart but also its racial and spatial proximity to Britain and Europe. Unlike other postcolonial societies where non-white indigenous populations often defined themselves against British invaders, Ireland challenges such clear distinctions, making ‘it difficult for colonized peoples outside Britain to accept their identity as post-colonial’, according to Bill Ashcroft.<sup>35</sup> Of course, such grounds should not be used to exclude the Irish from the colonial spectrum as it ‘only makes sense if one identifies the Irish historically with the settler colony in Ireland, the ruling Anglo-Irish interest, thus erasing in the process the entire indigenous population’.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, Ashcroft’s remark hints at the thinning line between coloniser and colonised in the Irish context. Thus, despite the general acceptance that Ulster, served as a ‘testing-ground’ for the British Empire’s expansion, the complex dynamics resulting from Ireland’s racial and spatial closeness to Britain, combined with its mutated historical circumstances, complicate the easy allocation postcolonialism tends to make between the coloniser and the colonised. This complexity, as Colin Graham highlights, renders ‘the ideological underpinnings of colonialism less easily defined and polarized in the Irish context compared to other postcolonial societies’.<sup>37</sup> This is not to say that the Irish were never stigmatised as racially other; rather, due to its connection to Great Britain, Ireland, as Glenn Hooper rightly sees it, is a ‘a layered and potentially dislocated entity that is on the one hand clearly a part of a

---

<sup>35</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2002), p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> Luke Gibbons, ‘Unapproved Roads, Ireland and Post-Colonial Identity’, in *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts Volume II*, ed. Diana Brydon (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 650.

<sup>37</sup> Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 93.

metropolitan culture, yet on other hand utterly divorced from it'.<sup>38</sup> In Northern Ireland, which remains part of the United Kingdom and is home to a mix of Anglo-Irish, Irish-Scottish descendants, and a minority of indigenous Irish populations, constructing a distinct Northern Irish identity proves even more challenging. As some critics note, those in Northern Ireland are 'at once Western and colonised, white and racially other, imperial and subjugated'.<sup>39</sup>

After all, the emphasis on Ireland's shared attributes with other colonies does not aim to perpetuate Irish anticolonial or national resistance as the exclusive and sufficient model to understand the specific nature of the Irish experience. Rather, the objective is to emphasise that Ireland's relationship with the British Empire and its parallels with other European nations do not obliterate its history as a colony, just as Ireland's comparability with former colonies should not overshadow its unique relation to Britain and other northern European countries. This stance is inevitably circular and does not technically resolve whether the politics and culture of Northern Ireland during the twentieth century, which underpins much of Heaney's life and work, should be best characterised as postcolonial, thereby framing it as a sectarian conflict between nationalists/republicans, who were necessarily Catholics due to colonial forces, and unionists/loyalists, who equally were necessarily Protestants for the same colonial reasons. Alternatively, this conflict may be perceived as, for instance, a protracted civil war rooted in the complex and enduring historical and geographical dynamics between the Irish and the British. Yet, by giving more prominence to the diverse perspectives surrounding Northern Ireland's dual identity as both a colony and more, I aim to make more

---

<sup>38</sup> Glenn Hooper and Colin Graham, eds., *Irish and Postcolonial Writing: History, Theory, Practice* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2002), p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> Colin Graham and R. Kirkland, eds., *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 15.

of a nuanced comment on Heaney – how he identified with, perceived, and represented the Troubles.

In this context, I suggest that Heaney can neatly fit within a coloniser-colonised framework, given the continuous resistance in the partitioned north against the legitimacy of British rule, leading to the rise of armed militant republicanism during the Troubles. However, this framework can be limiting, as it forces Heaney into one of two categories: either as an anticolonial nationalist dedicated to preserving cultural heritage and resisting colonial influence or as complicit with colonialism if he exhibits duality, inclusiveness, neutrality, or a lack of nativist impetus and political drive for decolonisation. I select *North* as a primary text in this thesis precisely because it deploys what I call a ‘composite locality’ as a strategy through which to diverge from the binary political address one might expect from a poet living and writing during the Troubles. Although Heaney wrote his bog poems during the early years of this sectarian conflict, this body of work is uncontainable within the political binaries of the time, such as coloniser versus colonised, Catholic versus Protestant, and republican versus loyalist. The bog poems, for instance, do not express the frustration of a Catholic minority facing discrimination, economic inequality, political marginalisation, or cultural suppression, nor do they seek to revive an idealised pre-colonial past in the first place. Instead, they recontextualise elements of a past marked by retributive and sacrificial violence to represent Northern Irish identity as a composite of historical, cultural, and geographical influences, rather than as rooted in a notion of a singular, fixed indigenous origin that is isolated from and opposed to colonial influences. By adopting this perspective, Heaney’s bog poems engage with the contemporary sectarian conflict of the Troubles without reducing it to simple binary oppositions. Through my reading of the bog poems, I aim to illuminate how Heaney, as a poet from a settler colony with close historical, geographical, and cultural ties to

the metropolitan centre, complicates conventional distinctions between coloniser and colonised, presenting Northern Ireland as a context where diverse, fluid identities can thrive.

Compared to other collections by Heaney, such as *Wintering Out* (1972) and *Field Work* (1979), which largely focus on the rural, Catholic, and Gaelic dimensions of Northern Irish identity, *North* offers a more richly layered and multifaceted representation of locality in Northern Ireland.<sup>40</sup> This makes it a more compelling text for my analysis of the local beyond nationalist and hybridising frameworks. Heaney's use of the bog myth in *North*, I argue, unsettles nationalist readers who typically expect a more pronounced sense of national pride and a clearer effort to distinguish Irish culture from foreign and colonial influences. The bog, being non-exclusively Irish, does not satisfy these nationalist expectations. Meanwhile, readers who approach Heaney's work through the conventional hybridity metaphor may recognise that he is not aiming to restore a pure, pre-colonial sense of Irishness. However, they may overlook how he employs the bog metaphor to articulate a nuanced, layered conception of the local, which goes beyond the mere blending of Irish/British, Catholic/Protestant, or republican/loyalist elements into a contemporary hybrid identity. For Heaney, the bog is not a foreign element that needs to be localised to Northern Ireland. Instead, it symbolises, as he once declared, 'the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it'.<sup>41</sup> Thus, if we interpret Heaney's bog poems as an excavation of the memories of violence that 'happened in and to' the land, this process involves conveying the multiple, overlapping, and at times conflicting perspectives on

---

<sup>40</sup> While *Wintering Out* evokes rural life through 'memories of cattle in winter fields. Beasts standing under a hedge, plastered in wet, looking at you with big patient eyes', *Field Work* also conjures images of the rural landscape and daily life of the countryside, as its title suggests. Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2009), p. 121.

<sup>41</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words' in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 54.

this violence. These perspectives are all Northern Irish, encompassing but not limited to nationalist attitudes, binary divisions, or a hybrid combination of them. I will explore these ideas more thoroughly in my discussion of Heaney's early bog poems, specifically 'Bogland' and 'Tollund Man'.

### **Heaney's two-mindedness and political torpidity**

Born in 1939 on the northern Irish side of the troubled border in County Derry, Heaney was a dual citizen of Ireland and Britain. His upbringing in an area marked by profound political and religious divisions highlighted a significant contrast within Ulster's predominantly Protestant unionist community due to his Catholic and nationalist background. Despite this background, Heaney told Dennis O'Driscoll, '[n]either my father nor my mother was actively Republican'.<sup>42</sup> In a conversation with Karl Miller, he noted that he would be more accurately categorised within the 'constitutional nationalist' tradition.<sup>43</sup> Heaney distinguished between two types of 'Catholic households in the North', namely, the 'papist' and the republican: the former, which best describes his household, leans toward pursuing reforms through 'parliamentary means', which sets it apart from the more militant republican strand associated with Irish separatists, represented by groups like Sinn Féin and the IRA.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps this distinction explains why Heaney maintained a politically 'torpid'<sup>45</sup> position during the pre-Troubles era, especially during his student years in the late 1950s at Queen's University,

---

<sup>42</sup> Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, p. 28.

<sup>43</sup> Seamus Heaney and Karl Miller, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (BTL, 2000), p. 51.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Allison, 'Politics', in *Seamus Heaney in Context*, edited by Geraldine Higgins (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2021), p. 231.

<sup>45</sup> In an interview with James Randall, as quoted in 'Politics' by Jonathan Allison, Heaney characterised himself as "Jungian in religion, and torpid in politics", revealing his inclination toward a Jungian symbolic or archetypal interpretation of the religious experience and an inactive engagement in political affairs. Jonathan Allison, 'Politics', p. 231.

despite being well aware of the political undertones in ‘cultural activities such as Ceilidhs or Irish language plays organized by An Cumann Gaelach (the Irish Language Society at Queen’s)’.<sup>46</sup> According to Jonathan Allison, Heaney recognised an ‘anti-Partitionist stance’ within himself and harboured a certain ‘them-and-us attitude’ towards unionist culture; however, he accepted that living ‘under the guardian angel of passivity’ was likely to persist.<sup>47</sup> Heaney’s political torpidity continued even as the Troubles erupted in the late 1960s, reigniting contentious debates over the Irish-English power dynamic and its implications for identification and political allegiance. In his reflection on this period, Heaney recounted an incident from his time living on the ‘wrong side’ of Belfast’s Lisburn Road, near a loyalist area. An English girl asked him, ‘[a]ren’t you the Irish poet?’ to which a shop owner interjected, ‘[n]ot at all, dear. He’s like the rest of us, a British subject living in Ulster!’<sup>48</sup> Heaney admitted, ‘Irish and all as I was, I’m afraid I hesitated to contradict her’.<sup>49</sup> Heaney described accumulating silent reservations whenever such incidents occurred, which intensified during the mid-1960s when he began publishing poems and was included in anthologies such as *Young Commonwealth Poets* and *Young British Poets* without protest.<sup>50</sup> This accumulation of silence and hesitancy in firmly aligning with either side of the binary is understandable considering the ongoing violence between Protestants and Catholics in 1970s Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, Heaney broke his silence in the 1980s protesting his inclusion in the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, a compilation edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion. Heaney’s protest took the form of a pamphlet titled *An Open Letter*, in which he famously declared, ‘Be advised, my passport’s green | No glass of ours was ever

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 367.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

raised | to toast The Queen'.<sup>51</sup> This *Open Letter* was published by the Field Day Theatre Company, which, according to Dennis O'Driscoll, was an ideal platform for making a 'public statement' of this nature: Field Day's aim was 'to reveal and confirm the existence of a continuous tradition, contributed to by all groups, sects and parties active in the island's history, one in which a more generous and hospitable notion of Ireland's cultural achievements will be evident'.<sup>52</sup> Heaney's protest, therefore, did not intend to embrace a narrow form of nationalism. Instead, he sought to highlight the diversity of identities and positions within the Northern Irish community. While nationalists may appreciate his choice of passport and his celebration of the culture of Catholic Ireland, where the custom was not to raise a glass in a toast to the Queen, unionists might perceive his stance as discourteous and possibly rebellious. The poem, however, can be read outside these terms; Heaney, as he articulated in one of his Oxford lectures, preferred to envision his poetry as conferring dual citizenship:

I wrote about the colour of the passport [...] not in order to expunge the British connection in Britain's Ireland but to maintain the right to diversity within the border, to be understood as having full freedom to the enjoyment of an Irish name and identity within that northern jurisdiction [...] There is nothing extraordinary about the challenge to be in two minds. If, for example, there was something exacerbating, there was still nothing deleterious to my sense of Irishness in the fact that I grew up in the minority in Northern Ireland and was educated within the dominant British culture. My identity was emphasized rather than eroded by being maintained in such circumstances.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Seamus Heaney, *An Open Letter* (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1983), p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Dennis O'Driscoll, 'Heaney in Public', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, edited by Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008), p. 56.

<sup>53</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*: (Oxford lectures) (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), pp. 276-277.

Against a backdrop in which unionists advocate for assimilation to promote the integration of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom and nationalists press for isolationism to preserve its cultural identity from foreign influences, Heaney suggested that being politically double, even if doubtful, might be productive in its own right and should be enjoyed rather than resented or penalised. This perspective, which allows one to be in two minds, to have more than one tradition and identity, and to entertain the value of more than one opinion, is not passive or weak; rather, it is inclusive, diverse, and even-handed. That Heaney came to view the doubleness of his experience as a positive formative influence, and potentially productive place, brought him praise by the *Sunday Times*, describing him as “an accomplished tightrope walker who has balanced the burdens and benefits of two cultures, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon”.<sup>54</sup> However, this tightrope act was not necessarily a diplomatic manoeuvre aimed at securing endorsement from establishment literary elites such as the British *Sunday Times*. Instead, it demonstrated Heaney’s ability to maintain even-handedness in a deeply divided society.

Heaney publicly called into question both the English and the Irish when he deemed it necessary. Just as he objected the term ‘British’ when he was featured in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, he asserted in another open letter from 1983 that a significant number of people would be embarrassed to be called Irish if the proposed amendments to the Constitution, aimed at strengthening the abortion ban, were to pass.<sup>55</sup> In ‘Anglo-Irish Occasions’, on the other hand, Heaney stressed that the ‘policies which Downing Street presumably regards as a hard line against terrorism can feel like a high-handed disregard for

---

<sup>54</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Portrait of a Poet’, *Sunday Times*, (14 May 1989), cited in Jonathan Allison, ‘Politics’, pp. 231-240.

<sup>55</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Letters to the Editor’, *Irish Times* (3 September 1983).

the self-respect of the Irish people'.<sup>56</sup> He observed that many poets and writers tended to avoid politics directly because they feared being cast as opportunistic or supporters of terrorist groups if criticising the conditions used to justify paramilitary actions.<sup>57</sup> He noted that this caution, or 'detachment', 'has its limits', suggesting that there comes a point when poets may feel compelled to address political issues directly despite these concerns.<sup>58</sup>

### Poetry in times of politics

One significant moment in which Heaney deviated from caution, was a front-page article in *The Listener* he wrote following the Civil Rights Movement march in October 1968.<sup>59</sup> In this article, Heaney revealed that in a previous letter, he had aimed for balance in his writings, attempting to present both sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland "as more or less blameworthy".<sup>60</sup> However, he now felt compelled to abandon this balanced approach and take a more decisive stance, urging the Catholic minority to risk being accused of disrupting "the new moderation" and advocate for justice with greater force and determination to maintain their self-respect.<sup>61</sup> In practice, Heaney wrote a number of explicitly political poems, particularly during the early years of the Troubles. Among these was 'Craig's Dragoons', a poem which Michael R. Molino characterises as 'a caustic political ballad designed solely to stir Catholic emotions and promote solidarity'.<sup>62</sup> Another poem, 'Intimidation', conveys Catholic anger toward the annual loyalist bonfires on July 12, commemorating William III's

---

<sup>56</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Anglo-Irish Occasions', *London Review of Books* (5 May 1988), <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v10/n09/seamus-heaney/anglo-irish-occasions>> [accessed 11 August 2024].

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> O'Driscoll, 'Heaney in Public', p. 64.

<sup>60</sup> qtd in O'Driscoll, 'Heaney in Public', p. 64.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Michael R. Molino, 'Flying by the Nets of Language and Nationality: Seamus Heaney, the 'English' Language, and Ulster's Troubles', *Modern Philology*, 91:2 (1993), p. 182, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/438827>> [accessed 1 July 2024].

victory at the Battle of the Boyne. It expresses how these celebrations perpetuate hostility and intimidation against the Catholic community. Speaking on behalf of a Catholic persona, the poem describes how

Their bonfire scorched his gable.

He comes home to kick through

A tumulus of ash,

A hot stour in the moonlight.

[...]

Ghetto rats! Are they the ones

To do the smoking out?<sup>63</sup>

These two poems, alongside others with explicit political content, appeared in various journals and magazines between mid-1969 and early 1972: ‘Craig’s Dragoons’ was published in Karl Miller’s ‘Opinion’ in *The Review*, while ‘Intimidation’ was featured in *The Malahat Review*.<sup>64</sup> However, several of these poems were notably absent from Heaney’s subsequent collections, particularly *Wintering Out*, the first collection released after these political poems had been published. As Molino explains, Heaney meticulously curated his published collections, often excluding or revising poems that had pronounced political agendas so as to transcend the polarised voices within his divided society.<sup>65</sup> By doing so, Heaney aimed to avoid ‘the monologic, exclusionary, and restrictive discourses’ in favour of developing ‘a polyphonic voice’ that reframes ‘the political and cultural antagonisms endemic to his

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> As indicated in Molino’s footnotes, p. 183.

<sup>65</sup> Molino, p. 182.

country' into a domain of 'reflexive, historical linguistics', demonstrating the enduring power of poetry to address and transcend political strife.<sup>66</sup> In a similar vein, Suhr-Sytsma notes that *The Listener* was 'the key periodical outlet for Heaney's work during the late 1960s and early 1970s'.<sup>67</sup> Following Karl Miller's takeover as editor in 1967, Suhr-Sytsma notes, Heaney's writing began to address Irish and political themes with greater explicitness.<sup>68</sup> Suhr-Sytsma examines Heaney's publication record and observes that the poet's decision to omit overtly political poems from his canon was significantly influenced by the dominant critical orthodoxy of his time, which held that 'a poet should *not* speak for the political interests of a specific community, that poetry should distinguish itself from discourses stressing ethnic or religious identity'.<sup>69</sup>

When the Troubles erupted, Heaney made a deliberate choice that his writing needed to engage with the escalating turmoil but did so without forsaking political and artistic caution. His 1974 essay 'Feeling into Words' states that '[f]rom that moment, the problem of poetry shifted from simply achieving a satisfactory verbal icon to the search for images and symbols that could adequately represent our predicament'.<sup>70</sup> Heaney's reference to the term 'verbal icon' evokes W. K. Wimsatt's influential 1954 critical study about the meaning of poetry, which, in Heaney's view, was no longer adequate in terms of what it offered writers at times of political upheaval. Heaney recognised that it is not impossible for poets to manage to operate with the fullest artistic integrity while serving social or political purposes. However, within the context of a violence-stricken Northern Ireland, the intersection between politics and art generated a moral conflict between the ethical and the artistic. Insofar as resistance

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>67</sup> Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, 'Publishing the Troubles', in *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 169.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>70</sup> Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', p. 56.

and issues of violence became necessary preoccupations for Heaney, the imperative to engage with these matters challenged his linguistic and poetic powers. As Heaney puts it in *The Redress of Poetry* (1989), he was confronted with the task of finding a middle ground between poetry as a ‘mode of redress – as an agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices’ and the imperative to ‘redress poetry as poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established, and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means’.<sup>71</sup>

In this predicament, Heaney stressed that he does not allude to ‘liberal lamentation that citizens should feel compelled to murder one another or deploy their different military arms over the matter of nomenclatures such as British or Irish’; nor does he refer to celebrating or condemning acts of resistance or atrocity, although he acknowledged the poetic potential in such expressions.<sup>72</sup> Instead, he strived to ‘discover a field of force’ that could ‘encompass the perspectives of a human reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity’ without forsaking the poetic process and experience.<sup>73</sup> In his quest for a more fitting wartime poetics, Heaney invokes the timeless Shakespearean question: ‘[h]ow with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?’, and the answer lies in Yeats’s phrase in ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’: by offering ‘emblems of adversity’.<sup>74</sup> What the Troubles required, Heaney suggests, is a response that, while reacting to immense political pressure, should unfold through poignant and enduring artistic expression. Heaney cleared the way for such an expression in his interview by Eavan Boland for her series ‘The Northern Writers’ Crisis of Conscience’ in August 1970:

---

<sup>71</sup> Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, p. 7.

<sup>72</sup> Heaney, ‘Feeling into Words’, p. 56.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

If I go to sit-downs, if I go on Civil Rights marches, if I see burned-out areas, it's not enough for me simply to retell these things, although a lot of people would like the poet to do this. The poet must in some way encompass these things into his own terms, his own way of looking at things. For me, it'll always be by some kind of analogy. I'd find images. I'd take them out of the community.<sup>75</sup>

Highlighting the necessity for a poet to not merely recount events but to integrate them into their unique perspective and aesthetic terms, Heaney encompasses the conflicting demands of the public need for a response to pressing communal issues and the private need to be true to an aesthetic impulse. This approach echoes Yeats's view of the poet as an intentional persona who somehow channels the public's demand for social response through private callings. A poet, as Yeats famously put it, is never the 'bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been re-born as an idea, something intended, complete'.<sup>76</sup> Poets who are reborn as ideas, it is safe to say, are more immune to external pressures. O'Driscoll remarks that Heaney quoted this statement frequently.<sup>77</sup> In 'Yeats as an Example?', for instance, he appreciates the independence, or at least privacy, that this formulation of art grants to the artist, noting that it is proper and even necessary for [the artist] to insist on his own language, his own vision, his own terms of reference'.<sup>78</sup> Hence, when once confronted by a republican activist whose demand, "[w]hen, for fuck's sake, are you going to write | Something for us?", Heaney's firm response was, "[i]f I do write something, | Whatever it is, I'll be writing for

---

<sup>75</sup> Eavan Boland, 'The Northern Writer's Crisis of Conscience', Part 1 of 3: 'Community', *Irish Times* (12 August 1970), p. 12, cited in Chris Morash 'Legacy', in *Seamus Heaney in Context* ed. by Geraldine Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>76</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Works*, vol. v: *Later Essays*, ed. by William H. O'Donnell (New York: Macmillan, 1994), p. 204.

<sup>77</sup> O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, p. 197.

<sup>78</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Yeats as an Example?' in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 101.

myself'.<sup>79</sup> Heaney recognised, as early in his career as *North*, that everything he wrote would be 'fine-combed for its relevance to the Troubles' but, O'Driscoll points out, 'continued speaking for himself – a private poet with a public platform, a public poet whose utterances were tested against private experience'.<sup>80</sup>

If we consider what Heaney wrote and said during the years of the Troubles in its totality, a mixed picture emerges. On the one hand, Heaney was willing to directly comment on Irish and political issues. On the other hand, he displayed a tendency to navigate these issues with greater subtlety. This duality might be viewed as a progression from the politically direct Heaney of the early Troubles to the more politically oblique poet who achieved the 'polyphonic voice' Molino described and the more aesthetically-oriented poet who moved away from the journalistic style encouraged during Karl Miller's editorship, as noted by Suhr-Sytsma. Should we consider the later, more nuanced Heaney as truly representative of his beliefs, or was it the earlier, more direct style that reflected his genuine convictions? To assume either would, I believe, impose a fixed identity on a postcolonial poet who, like any artist, has the right to adapt, change, and explore different approaches: to be reactive in some situations and more subtle in others. Years after the publication of *North*, 'The Strand at Lough Beg' appeared in *Field Work* (1979). This poem is an elegy that addresses the sectarian murder of Heaney's cousin Colum McCartney. While the poem centres on personal loss, as David Lloyd argues, it simultaneously serves as a 'public condemnation of sectarian violence' and the 'terror' underpinning 'oppression'.<sup>81</sup> The focus of this chapter is not on examining Heaney's approach to writing politically topical poems, his reluctance to publish them, and

---

<sup>79</sup> qtd in O'Driscoll, 'Heaney in Public', p. 65.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> David Lloyd, 'Review Article: Seamus Heaney's "Field Work"', *Ariel*, 12:2 (April 1981), p. 88, <<https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ariel/article/view/32571>> [accessed 4 August 2024].

his preference for addressing violence and conflict indirectly. Yet, my analysis of his bog poems sheds light on how they navigate political and aesthetic pressures, showcasing his negotiation of the place of political rhetoric and journalistic prose in poetry. The bog myth, as I aim to illuminate, serves as a symbolic construct that allows Heaney to address sacrificial and political violence from an artistically and politically nuanced vantage point. In other words, it provides him with the aesthetic distance to engage with themes of conflict and violence without aligning exclusively with any specific political faction or ideology.

### The emblematic bog

Heaney illustrates the significance of reworking local materials as a strategy for postcolonial poets to enable an authentically insider perspective that remains true to the intricacies of a polarised context like that of the Troubles, without simply echoing the biased dictations of official affiliations – be they political, media-driven, or perhaps even literary in nature. His search for images and symbols adequate to the Irish political predicament was satisfactorily met by the incorporation of the Iron Age myths of the bog Mother Goddess and sacrificial bodies. Heaney encountered the bog symbol pertinent to the Irish political predicament in P.V. Glob's *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*. Originally published in Danish in 1965, the book was translated into English in 1969, the year the Troubles started.<sup>82</sup> *The Bog People* describes the excavation processes of a group of bog bodies and speculates on the cultural and social contexts in which they lived, as well as infers the circumstances that led to their abrupt, violent deaths. These sacrificial bodies were preserved in peat bogs in Denmark and other European countries since the Danish Early Iron Age period (approximately between

---

<sup>82</sup> Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', p. 57.

100 BC and 500 AD); they were later discovered in the twentieth century. This scholarly work inspired Heaney's poetic response to the violence of the Troubles with its detailed accounts, photographs, and radiographs. Bog bodies that fall into three distinct groups were particularly useful for Heaney's analogies. The first group comprises young men sacrificed before springtime to ensure the fertility of the Mother Earth Goddess, Nerthus. Glob determined the cause of their deaths through examinations of the method of their killing and their last meals, which often consisted of a variety of cultivated winter grains and seeds. The second group includes queens and women of high rank buried with regal garments and ornaments. The last group is of individuals executed for crimes such as adultery and witchcraft, who were held down in the bogs by heavy stones or tree branches, such as birch and hazel. Glob often inferred the type of crime and manner of punishment by consulting the Roman historian and ethnographer Tacitus who documented similar events. I will return to this discussion later in the chapter to elaborate on how Heaney recognised the potential of Glob's book for his own poetic dealing of the bog and bog bodies with a view to interrogate – from the aesthetic and non-binary distance the Jutland narratives afford - the burden of the Irish complex experience.

The first bog poem Heaney wrote is 'Bogland' in *Door into the Dark* (1969), which introduces the bog as a metaphor for Ireland:

Our unfenced country

Is bog that keeps crusting

Between the sights of the sun.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems, 1966-1987* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 17, <<https://archive.org/details/newselectedpoems0000hean>> [accessed 22 September 2024].

In this poem, Heaney depicts the bog in both spatial and temporal terms. Spatially, he envisions it as ‘unfenced’ – a borderless landscape, unbound by politically imposed divisions and internal conflicts. Temporally, the bog’s layered structure – ‘Every layer they strip | Seems camped on before’ – suggests that the present is just one layer in a long history of events.<sup>84</sup> This makes the bog a living archive, a ‘wet centre’ that is ‘bottomless’.<sup>85</sup> Heaney’s portrayal of the bog supports my argument that Northern Ireland can be understood as a ‘composite locality’. Historically, the bog has infinite layers, each interacting with those above and below, while geographically, it extends beyond a single confined site. His reference to the bog as a ‘bottomless’ ‘centre’ is also significant to the argument in my thesis, as it encapsulates the paradox of the local: while culturally specific and tied to a geographical centre, it is not static or isolated from other places and histories. Heaney maintains the notion of a designated centre or origin for the Northern Irish bog, but he views it as an ever-expanding entity. This idea of an infinite, elusive centre emphasises that trying to pinpoint or trace a true essence, an exact starting point, a foundational source from which everything Northern Irish emerges is futile and unnecessary. In my view, the indefinability of the centre does not mean that it ceases to exist but rather that its current significance lies in the layers of interwoven influences contributing to it.

Indeed, the idea of the bog as a ‘centre’, or, as this thesis argues, ‘local’ to Heaney is debatable. This is because, while the bog is a feature of the Northern Irish landscape, the Iron Age myth associated with it originates from a different part of northern Europe, namely the Iron Age cultures of regions such as Denmark and other parts of Scandinavia. Nonetheless, I read the bog myth as local to Heaney in spite of – or perhaps because of – its broader

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

European origins and function. It is useful here to note that the cultural specificity of the bog myth does not solely depend on its point of origin but also on how it is applied within a particular context. What makes the bog myth local to Heaney, on one level, is its role as an allegory of the relationship between people – Northern Irish, in the case of his contemporary context – and the land they inhabit, emphasising their reverence for the land and the sacrifices they are willing to offer in its honour. Beyond this functional significance, Heaney also views the bog myth as originating locally for him. He explores this notion in ‘The Tollund Man’, another foundational bog poem from *Wintering Out*, where he describes feeling ‘at home’ with the sacrificial victim found in Aarhus, a Danish town on the Jutland Peninsula. Given that this Danish site is not geographically local to Heaney, it might appear, when reading the poem, that his bond with the bog man arises solely from its functional resonance – because ‘Out here in Jutland’, what happened ‘In the old man-killing parishes’, makes him ‘feel lost, | Unhappy and at home’.<sup>86</sup> However, as Heaney states in an interview with Dennis O’Driscoll, ‘even if there had been no Northern Troubles, no man killing in the parishes, I would still have felt at home with that “peat-brown head” – an utterly familiar countryman’s face’.<sup>87</sup> This suggests that, for Heaney, the bog legacy, much like the Vikings’ history, has become an integral part of Northern Irish identity.

The bog metaphor evolved and gained depth across several of Heaney’s collections. However, I take the bog poems in *North* as my focus rather than any other collection of Heaney because *North* marks the full development of the bog symbol as emblematic to the violence of the Troubles. *North* not only contains the largest number of bog poems, but also demonstrates the culmination of Heaney’s exploration of the bog’s symbolic significance. In earlier collections

---

<sup>86</sup> Heaney, *New Selected Poems*, p. 32.

<sup>87</sup> Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, p. 158.

such as *Door into the Dark* and *Wintering Out*, the bog primarily functioned as a connection to the Irish landscape and history, with less emphasis on themes of violence, sacrifice, and the political conflict of the Troubles. In later collections like *Field Work*, the bog metaphor recedes as Heaney moves toward a voice more engaged with his ‘current circumstances’, focused on his life in Glenmore, where ‘silage smell came from the farm next door’.<sup>88</sup> The bog metaphor reappears in ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’ from *District and Circle* (2006), yet in a different, less violence-charged context. Here, Heaney notes that the bog figure “came again to remind [him] that lyric poetry was OK. The Tollund Man released me into pleasure”.<sup>89</sup> This suggests that the Tollund Man allowed in Heaney’s later collection ‘a sense of release out of obligation into an airier style, and a style, as he put it, less of stained glass than of plain window glass’.<sup>90</sup>

In *North*, Heaney responds to the Troubles in a series of six bog poems: ‘Bog Queen’ gives voice to a bog body of a Viking queen that was found in Ireland in a land owned by Lord Moira, an Anglo-Scottish descent. In the poem, she is portrayed as ‘waiting’ between the turf-face, ‘demesne wall’, ‘heathery levels’, and stone with ‘glass-like teeth’ (25), feeling decomposed, uncomfortable, and even betrayed. ‘Come to the Bower’ evokes Glob’s account of a bog witch body found in 1835 in Denmark. The poem details the interaction between the poet-speaker who traverses through ‘sweet briar and tangled vetch’ and ‘the dark-bowered queen’ who ‘is waiting’ (24). ‘Punishment’, on the other hand, expresses his confusion about how to feel toward victims of tribal punishments: the bog body of Windeby Girl, presumably killed for adultery, and Catholic women tarred and feathered by the IRA for having affairs

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>89</sup> qtd in Peter Sirr, “IN STEP WITH WHAT ESCAPED ME”: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney’, *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 98 (2009), 9–27 (p. 25) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40649068>> [accessed 19 October 2024].

<sup>90</sup> Peter Sirr, “IN STEP WITH WHAT ESCAPED ME”, p. 25.

with British Army members; both are perceived as criminals in the eyes of the tribe. ‘The Grauballe Man’ allegorises the story of an iconic bog body that was found by peat-cutters in April 1952 near Grauballe in Denmark. It contemplates the man’s demise with a lyrical, reverent curiosity, juxtaposing the aesthetic elements with the reality of his violent end. Similarly, ‘Strange Fruit’ confronts us with the moral responsibility toward ritual sacrifices, with its narrator pondering whether the severed head of the bog girl should be considered a revered iconography or a symbol of meaningless tragedy. Finally, ‘Kinship’ contemplates the bond between the bog, the goddess who ‘swallows our terror and love’ (37) and generations of its inhabitants including Heaney who, in the poem, wanders at a peat bog.

Coming from a family of peat farmers, Heaney had special bonds with the bog, as detailed in a pivotal moment in his autobiographical essay ‘Mossbawn’. Heaney felt as though he was betrothed to the bogs, stating ‘I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago’, when he stripped to the whit and bathed in a moss-hole, returning home in wet clothes feeling ‘somehow initiated’.<sup>91</sup> It is no surprise that such an early experience primed him to view the bog as a nexus of historical, cultural, and emotional layers, a metaphor for the symbiotic interplay between murky mystery and alluring beauty, past and present, land and people. Beyond this personal, and by extension, Irish context, Heaney broadened the scope of his recognition of the bog metaphor, drawing on Glob’s findings that juxtapose Ireland’s nineteen bog people with one hundred and sixty-six in Denmark among other finds in North Europe. Thus, Heaney presents us with various guises of the female goddess, suggesting that the mythology or symbolism around her may have expanded and evolved, now intertwined with Irish nationalists’ identification and intense bond with their homeland. By referencing

---

<sup>91</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Mossbawn’ in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 19.

Glob's insights into the goddess's need for new bridegrooms each winter for spring renewal, Heaney suggests that, when viewed in the context of the Irish political martyrdom tradition, typified by 'Kathleen Ni Houlihan', this archaic ritual transcends mere 'barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern'.<sup>92</sup> This archetypal thread is far from being a mere coincidence. It is what I have suggested Heaney used to shape *North* as a poetry collection that transcends the sectarian confines of its Northern Irish twentieth-century setting, creating a compounded sense of locality that intertwines the present with distant times and horizons. In so doing, Heaney emphasises the role of poetry as a means to 'define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past', although acknowledging the challenge of straying from 'the realm of technique into the realm of tradition'.<sup>93</sup> According to Heaney, 'to forge a poem is one thing, to forge the uncreated conscience of the race, as Stephen Dedalus put it, is quite another and places daunting pressures and responsibilities on anyone who would risk the name of poet'.<sup>94</sup>

### **Critical reception: insufficiencies of Heaney's symbolism**

Heaney's turn towards local materials in the form of the Iron Age bog in order to address the political, sectarian, and deep-rooted cultural conflict in his home country has generated significant critical attention. Among readers who praised Heaney for using the bog symbol to contemplate sectarian afflictions was Helen Vendler, who acknowledged his attempt to locate the conflict beyond colonial, sectarian, or economic representations, arguing that Heaney

---

<sup>92</sup> Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', p. 57.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

turned in *North* to an archeological myth averring that a wide practice of prehistoric violence, encompassing both the Scandinavian countries and Ireland, accounted for the survival of savage tribal conflict, which fundamentally was neither colonial nor sectarian, neither economic nor class-caused, but rather deeply cultural.<sup>95</sup>

Other readers, on the other hand, criticised this same quality of tone for lacking a firm and clear political standpoint. Irish nationalist commentator Desmond Fennell famously attacked Heaney for avoiding a substantive engagement with the conflict. Fennell believed that Heaney's evocation of the prehistoric bodies of Jutland only nods in the direction of the history of an irrational cycle of violence, passively suggesting that what happened 'is evil and sad'.<sup>96</sup> In contrast, critics like Henry Hart argued that Heaney allowed his Catholic background and republican sentiments to dominate his poems, for instance by lending Irish nationalist fighters the quality of a religious sacrifice.<sup>97</sup> Hart also criticised what he saw as Heaney's portrayal of Mother Ireland as both the goddess of the sacred Irish soil and the Catholic girl punished for consorting with enemy soldiers: murdered and reburied, 'she rises again to continue the tragicomedy in which, as mythic emblem of the Irish motherland, she is consecrated and desecrated in turn'.<sup>98</sup>

Ciaran Carson, taking a different stance, accused Heaney of 'offering his understanding of the situation almost as a consolation'.<sup>99</sup> Carson based his argument on the assumption that Heaney's recognition of an archetypal pattern between Jutland and republican society entails

---

<sup>95</sup> Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), pp. 50-51.

<sup>96</sup> Desmond Fennell, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No 1* (ELO Publications: Dublin, 1991), pp. 16-17.

<sup>97</sup> Henry Hart, 'History, Myth, and Apocalypse in Seamus Heaney's "North"' in *Contemporary Literature*, 30:3, (1989), p. 404, doi:10.2307/1208411.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405.

<sup>99</sup> Ciaran Carson, 'Escaped from the Massacre?' in *A Twentieth-century Literature Reader: Texts and Debates*, ed. Suman Gupta and David Johnson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 268-269.

yoking together the peculiarities of place and time into a Golden Bough-like anthropology ‘in which the real difference between our [Northern Irish] society and that of Jutland in some vague past are glossed over for the sake of the parallels of ritual’.<sup>100</sup> He thus perceived the poet’s comparisons of Iron Age ritual killing and contemporary violence in Northern Ireland in poems such as ‘Punishment’ as silently condoning the violence perpetrated against the victims by implying that suffering like this is natural and tribal retributions are common as they ‘have always happened; they happened then, they happen now, and that is sufficient grounds for understanding and absolution’.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, David Lloyd suggested that Heaney posits ‘a psychic continuity between the sacrificial practices of an Iron Age people and the “bankrupt psychology of the Irishmen and Ulstermen who do the killing”’.<sup>102</sup> Both Carson and Lloyd, furthermore, expressed concerns about the potential ethical implications of Heaney’s symbolic approach to violence, fearing it might glorify and aestheticize violence. Lloyd believed Heaney reduces ‘history to myth’, which, while creating a sense of place identity, is dangerous as ‘it aestheticizes violence’,<sup>103</sup> while Carson saw Heaney as becoming ‘the laureate of violence, a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual, an apologist for the ‘situation’, in the last resort, a mystifier’.<sup>104</sup>

For a poet to be regarded as insufficiently political, an essentialist who sees sectarian murder as endemic in the North since the Iron Age, a temperate who probes the past in the peat away from sectarian labels, or less favourably a covert propagandist who lends his voice to sectarian politics, is sufficient to indicate his polyphonic, inclusive, and diverse outlook. Heaney’s bog poems are not only a glorification of nationalist martyrdom; nor are they a

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> David Lloyd, “‘Pap for the Dispossess’d:’ Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity”, *Boundary 2*, 13.2/3 (1985), p. 331, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/303105>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>104</sup> Carson, ‘Escaped from the Massacre?’, p. 268.

colonialist's critique of Northern Ireland's past and current tribal violence. These poems contain a mixture of both. They are thereby open to express dual, conflicting, or uncertain positions regarding both the imperialist take on violence and that of the Northern Irish community, with all its affiliations, including the republican, nationalist one. Heaney's critics have often failed to sense this complexity, either by disregarding the subtleties of the poems in order to definitely identify the political stance of the poet (Desmond Fennell and Henry Hart as examples), or by assuming that the poet sought to bridge two distant historical periods through proposing the Jutland bogs and the ritual sacrificial corpses they persevered as analogous to Northern Ireland and its sectarian-conflict victims (Carson, Lloyd, and Hart are examples). These readers, in other words, venture an over-generalized understanding of Heaney's declaration of the 'archetypal pattern', assuming that the archetype entails repetition – that Heaney's use of the archetype glosses over differences between two geographically and historically distant cultures for the sake of forging a sense of continuity. On this reading, the past continues to feed in and influence the violence of the present.

What these critics are missing, however, is that Heaney is not just retelling the stories of the bogs. I acknowledge that Heaney draws from Glob's insights into the bog legacy in recognition of the potential of the archetypal context it offers. My readings, therefore, trace the inspiration of his poems back to Glob's accounts. Yet, Heaney's reworkings extend far beyond mere retelling; he reinterprets the narratives, alters their sequences, adds to them, manipulates their symbolism, presents alternative viewpoints, has a perspective on them, or even offers commentaries and critiques on them. Accordingly, I propose a departure from the presumption of a straightforward, linear continuity between the Northern European Iron Age civilization and contemporary Northern Ireland in Heaney's bog poems. I closely examine these reworkings to demonstrate his deviation from a deterministic narrative that merely

perpetuates the idea of a predetermined pattern of repetitive and cyclical violence. By weaving elements from the bog legacy with other historical references, Heaney showcases the layers of factors and experiences that have shaped the unique bond between the land and its inhabitants in the North.

I argue that Heaney's reworking of the bog legacy suits two purposes: firstly, it fulfills his poetic aim to 'define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past'<sup>105</sup> – significant because it moves beyond simplistic binary oppositions that often characterise the contemporary discourse of the Troubles. Secondly, it serves his poetic imagination that aims at transcending the given event by seeking a connection with the past through images and symbols that help him to derive a poetic statement and not a mere comment or description of the event. In my analysis, I divide the bog poems based on their thematic concern that corresponds with each purpose. The three poems 'Bog Queen', 'Come to the Bower', and 'Punishment' address the ideological positions that the poet-speaker navigates when dealing with the violence of the bog history and the Troubles. The two poems 'The Grauballe Man' and 'Strange Fruit' deal with the implications of Heaney's choice of the symbolic approach towards this violence and the discomfort surrounding the aestheticization of violence. I situate 'Punishment' between the two subject matters because it participates in both ideological and aesthetic dimensions of the bog. I conclude with 'Kinship', the final poem in the bog series, as it sums up Heaney's approach to the bog as a liminal construct that is shaped by multiple influences, spanning from the time of Nerthus to the Northern Ireland in which Heaney is situated.

---

<sup>105</sup> Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', p. 57.

## Heaney's chronological flux and layered referentiality

### A self-aware sinner: empathy, silence, and voyeurism

On its surface, 'Bog Queen', the first bog poem in my discussion, unfolds with the first-person narrative of the queen herself lying 'waiting' in a small peat bog. This poem is inspired by Lady Moira's account of the excavation process of a bog body on Drumkeragh Mountain, County Down, Ireland, during the spring of 1781 – a period marked by Anglo-Scottish occupation.<sup>106</sup> Notably, this account is the earliest documented discovery of a bog body in Ireland; Glob recounts, the skeletal remains of a small woman, adorned with various garments, were found nestled right at the bottom of the bog, on a gravel layer and under a thick bed of peat.<sup>107</sup> Glob gives a meticulous record of the garments found with the queen: a skirt; a cape; three woollen rugs; ornaments found on the skull, and belonging to a diadem or something similar; a veil and, finally, a larger garment on which the body had lain; these valuable possessions led Glob to then speculate that this high-ranking lady was likely a Danish Viking queen.<sup>108</sup> Following Lady Moira's account, Glob reports that the body was first discovered by a local peat-cutter, who, upon unearthing the skeleton, said he had promptly re-buried it; subsequent visitors, however, are said to have taken the best of the body's belonging.<sup>109</sup> The peat-cutter conveyed retaining only the coarsest cloth, a detail later confirmed by Lady Moira stating that 'she first secured the coarse cloth, but later, having paid well, she obtained another lock of hair and some cloth of finer quality'.<sup>110</sup>

---

<sup>106</sup> P.V. Glob, *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved*, trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 103, <[https://archive.org/details/bogpeopleironage00glob\(mode/1up?view=theater\)](https://archive.org/details/bogpeopleironage00glob(mode/1up?view=theater))> [accessed 4 March 2024].

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 1 'Woman of rank with Roman wine-ladle, gloss goblet and ornaments' (Glob 139)

In interpreting 'Bog Queen', readers like Neil Corcoran have often underscored the political and historical dimensions surrounding its discovery, asserting that '[t]he fact that this was an Irish bog preservation' afforded Heaney some native ground and 'a genuinely historical, not merely an imaginative, connection between Ireland and Jutland'.<sup>111</sup> Consequently, the poem has been widely interpreted as an extended metaphor in which the bog queen represents Nerthus and, subsequently, Mother Ireland. From this perspective, the poem suggests that, just as the queen undergoes a process of decay and eventual rebirth, Ireland too experiences cycles of decline and renewal.

Henry Hart, in his analysis, infers this conclusion, proposing that Heaney mythologizes the Danish discovery to make it a symbol that 'subsumes a legendary Houlihan and a contemporary Irishman fatally enmeshed in sectarian conflict'.<sup>112</sup> Hart contends that the queen metamorphoses into a symbol embodying the essence of Mother Ireland, who is resurrected into a deity and 'for whom further sacrifices are performed'.<sup>113</sup> Michael Parker aligns with this perspective, designating the waiting queen as an 'incarnation of Nerthus, the

<sup>111</sup> Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 69.

<sup>112</sup> Hart. 'History, Myth, and Apocalypse', p. 405.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

earth goddess, to whom the Tollund Man was sacrificed'.<sup>114</sup> According to Parker, the queen, like the dispossessed Irish population, 'endured centuries of waiting by becoming at one with the land and its suffering'.<sup>115</sup> She accepts, according to Parker, 'the indignities of time'; her body acquired the features of her adopted landscape; and although buried, her triumphant rebirth will soon be achieved.<sup>116</sup>

Parker is right in suggesting that Heaney implies the bog land in which the queen is buried troubles her. Structurally, the poem is composed of nine quatrain stanzas followed by a final couplet, sequentially delineating the metamorphic journey she undergoes while buried in a land that appears unwelcoming. The opening stanza establishes this spatial context, depicting the land where the queen is buried and lies waiting as lethal, dangerous, and partially inhospitable: although covered by 'turf-face and demesne wall', she is trapped 'between heathery levels | and glass-toothed stone' (25). The subsequent stanzas then unfold aspects of the queen's physical state, describing her body as bearing 'braille' marks 'for the creeping influences' she senses, especially from the sun, which she describes as having 'groped over my head' (25). Despite experiencing long cold winters similar to 'the nozzle of fjords' (26), the queen's body gets terribly affected by the destructive forces of 'the seeps of winter', which sneak through her 'fabrics and skins' (25). It 'digested me', she tells us, causing 'the illiterate roots' of this land to ponder and then die inside her empty 'stomach and socket' (25).

In this sense, if the bog queen can represent Mother Ireland at all, then it seems that the poem is more of a synecdoche in which she speaks about the bog land owned by the English descendant Lord Moira, being the foreign element that wreaks havoc in the body/country. Yet, quickly concluding that the poem is about Mother Ireland's resurrection seems too hasty.

---

<sup>114</sup> Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: the Making of the Poet* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 135.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

The presumed rebirth of the queen does not align with typical patterns of renewal or fertility rituals in Northern civilizations. Unlike the rebirth associated with the Mother Goddess Nerthus, which involves male sacrifices, the queen's rebirth is achieved through the cutting of a lock of her hair: 'The plait of my hair, | a slimy birth-cord | of bog, had been cut | and I rose from the dark' (27). The 'nest of my hair', she tells us, was 'robbed. | I was barbered | and stripped | by a turf-cutter's spade' (26). The turf-cutter then immediately 'veiled me again | and packed coomb softly' (26). This violent intervention was a result of the fact that 'a peer's wife bribed him' (27), the local turf-cutter.

Those familiar with Glob's context can discern Heaney's emphasis on this act as repulsive. In his poem, she was robbed, barbered, and stripped. There is also the insinuation that Moira, the wife of the noble English occupier, bribed the turf-cutter to hew off the body of the soil rather than 'paid well', as Glob neutrally put it, which is expressive of Heaney's political opinion about the complicated relationship between the Irish and the English. Heaney does not appear keen to highlight the Catholic endeavours to revive their land after its separation from the United Kingdom so to speak, but rather he pokes at their impossible cloak of purity. In his understanding of the bog myth, Heaney relies fundamentally on the scholarly interpretation of Glob. And although Heaney remained very consistent in that he followed the sequence of the story, especially in his corresponding list of the queen's garments and belongings, he really seems to use Glob's account to manipulate a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity. In 'Bog Queen', Heaney allows himself to be somewhat arbitrary in the way he builds up concordances between the queen of the bog and the landscape that preserved her body and the Irish and Ireland. So, to take this effected sense of continuity for granted is to misunderstand a central theme in Heaney's poem. The bog queen in this poem is not Ireland, Nerthus, the Goddess, the violent, devourer of life, who claims the lives of the sacrificial

victims to ensure the renewal and fertility of the territory in the spring. Nor is she a bearer of the spirit of Northern Irish nationalists. Rather, she is an object of the past, that has undergone a transformative, if decomposing journey, and now rises from the unbearable Irish ground that is dominated by an English descendant.

This interpretation reveals the nature of her rise, which is not a rebirth but a revelation. Her emergence from the bog signifies a moment of exposure, highlighting the suffering and decay she endured and emphasising the violence and exploitation she experienced, rather than suggesting any renewal or revival. When the queen 'rose from the dark' at the end of the poem, she appeared neither revived nor dignified but rather mutilated: 'and I rose from the dark, | hacked bone, skull-ware, | frayed stitches, tufts' (27). While the concept of rebirth in literature is not always associated with the goddess achieving fertility, no true rebirth seems to take place here: Heaney does not employ any symbol or imagery signifying rebirth – no revival of nature, blooming flowers, or a cyclical rhythm of life. What essentially determines that what occurs in the poem is not a rebirth is not only the way in which the poem ends, but also the fact that this rebirth entailed no death at all. The repeated 'I lay waiting' stresses the fact that she retains some form of life. She senses all of the processes of decay even as she undergoes them. Her 'brain' is 'darkening' yet alive as 'a jar of spawn | fermenting underground | dreams of Baltic amber' (25). Moreover, Heaney's choice of dramatic monologue is tactful not only in ensuring a distinction between her views and those of the poet, but also in depicting her as a living being throughout the poem; she feels the decay, waits to be uncovered, and finally rises.

Some have concluded that the queen's rise indicates that something weighty will happen, that she is coming for revenge. Parker, for instance, understands the imagery of the birth-cord

being cut as symbolic of the queen being ‘rudely awakened from her hibernation’ by an Irish turf-cutter and ultimately sees her rise a rebirth meant for revenge.<sup>117</sup> So does Christine Hoff Kraemer, who perceives the queen’s rising scene as a warning that Ireland will awake one day and revenge all the past wrongs committed during the English occupation, noting that as the queen is reborn, so ‘the archetypes of ancient Ireland are given disturbing new life in the Troubles of the twentieth century’.<sup>118</sup> But there seems nothing in the poem that compels a sense of such urgency: the tone is anecdotal, direct and earnest rather than vengeful or spiteful. The rise of the queen is more of a restoration of the past that could not handle the betrayal of the native Irish (Catholic) and Anglo-Irish (Protestant). The Danish Viking queen, being found on an Irish land affirms Ireland’s Northern European identity, an identity that proceeded the Anglo-Irish contested binary which unrests Ireland. The bogs are neither exclusively Irish nor British, but Northern in a more expansive sense that eludes geopolitical boundaries. It is a shared territory, a liminal space, with a complex history of violence. Heaney’s pointed critique of the betrayal inflicted by both denominations is perhaps one aspect he shares with his persona. He too resents binaries in Northern Ireland and embraces its having traces of the two strands.

The idea of the bog land as a liminal space with layers of history also manifests itself in the second bog poem we examine: ‘Come to the Bower’. In this poem, the poet is again intrigued by Glob’s account of a bog body found in 1835 by ditch diggers at Haraldskjaer in Denmark.<sup>119</sup> The body, which, according to Glob, was found pinned down with a willow stick, was either an ancient Norse queen, namely ‘Gunhild’, or a ‘witch’.<sup>120</sup> The dispute over

---

<sup>117</sup> Parker, p. 136.

<sup>118</sup> Christine Hoff Kraemer, ‘Channelling the Great Mother: Gender Dualism in Heaney’s ‘Bog Queen’’, (2003), <<http://www.christinehoffkraemer.com/bogqueen.html>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>119</sup> Glob, p. 74.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., pp. 74-76.

her identity was resolved given that the way in which she was buried, fixed in the bog with wooden crooks and stakes, meant that she was likely a witch that was feared to walk again after death. The idea behind fixing her in the bog was to prevent her or her ghost from coming for revenge, for the bog people believed that so long as the sticks stood, the ghost remained in place pinned in the ground; '[i]f the sticks were removed, however, troubles would start all over again'.<sup>121</sup>

In the poem, this story is re-evoked beginning with a speaker approaching, with his hands, the



Figure 2 'Stakes and branches that pinned 'Queen Gunhild' in the bog' (Glob 75)

grave of 'the dark-bowered queen' who 'Is waiting', pinned down into 'the black maw | Of the peat' with 'sharpened willow' (24). The speaker then begins unwrapping her, observing her skull, her hair, and her throat. As 'spring water | Starts to rise around her', the speaker reaches 'past | The riverbed's washed | Dream of gold to the bullion | Of her Venus bone' (24). This act of revealing the body is remarkably suffused with strong sensuous sexual imagery: the speaker's hands, intimately 'touched | By sweetbriar and tangled vetch', are 'Foraging' to where the queen is waiting for him 'to unwrap skins and see | The pot of

the skull, | The damp tuck of each curl' (24). This sensory act is enriched with the phallic imagery of the 'sharpened willow' which 'Withdraws gently' 'Out of the black maw | Of the

---

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

peat' (24). The image then culminates as spring water starts to rise around the queen while the speaker reaches to 'bullion | Of her Venus bone' (24).

Since the poem is about a female bog figure, an immediate connection can be established between the queen/Ireland and Nerthus, the Iron Age sacrifice-seeking Mother Goddess. Henry Hart finds this parallel significant, especially when considering that the title of the poem relates directly to the similarly titled patriotic Irish song, 'Will You Come to the Bower?' This song, which was popular during the early nineteenth century, served as a call to Irish exiles to return home to 'come and awake our dear land from its slumber | And her fetters we'll break, links that long have encumbered'.<sup>122</sup> The queen's bower is then, Hart argues, Nerthus's grove: a 'womb as well as tomb'.<sup>123</sup> If we stop reading the poem here, with the context of this allusion established that the bog queen is a personification of Mother Ireland, the sacrifice-seeking goddess, we might assume Heaney's 'Come to the Bower' is nothing but a celebration of Irish nationalist martyrs. Yet, the speaker's attention to 'the bullion | Of her Venus bone' at the end of the poem shifts the focus from the ancient Norse queen to the history of imperial England. The reference to bullion, precious solid gold, brings to mind the typical trope of the English economic extraction of Ireland's resources. Hart therefore suggests that we observe the link between the speaker's attempt to reach the queen's 'Venus bone' and that of the imperialist conquerors of England, noting that Heaney seems to see 'the differences in their political stances as differences in sexual preferences'.<sup>124</sup> Given the contemporary political dimension added by the title 'Come to the Bower', Hart concludes that the poem is rather a retelling of the imperialist ravaging treatment of the colonised and raped

---

<sup>122</sup> Hart, 'History, Myth, and Apocalypse', p. 404.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., pp. 404-405

Mother Ireland. He, however, asserts that, if Heaney's unpinning and unwrapping of Ireland is to explore her troubled past, 'he is hardly dispassionate in his quest'.<sup>125</sup>

Patricia Coughlan develops an account of this feminine aspect of the poem in her seminal study 'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney (1997). Coughlan centres her argument on what she views as the common representation in Irish poetry of feminine archetypes as 'merged with the imagery of woman-as-land-and-national-spirit from the tradition of Irish nationalist political rhetoric'.<sup>126</sup> In the Irish context, women were seen as the bearers of the nation both through their role in the domestic sphere and through the creation of mythicised tropes that came to represent Irish nationalism, such as Mother Ireland. Heaney's work, Coughlan states, subsumes existing tropes of Irish women as 'female icons of ideal domesticity [...] who are associated with unmediated naturalness'.<sup>127</sup> Coughlan is concerned about Heaney's engagement in a sexual politics that continues to subordinate women as well as his recapitulation of the very colonial narratives of feminised Irish land that his attempts at creating a new sense of Northern Irish nationalism is trying to counter. For Coughlan, Heaney's invocation of a feminised Mother Ireland positions the male poet as an 'individuated masculine self' that must penetrate the feminised bogland in order to achieve self-discovery and, by extension, the discovery of national identity.<sup>128</sup>

Both Coughlan's and Hart's readings of Heaney's position in relation to Mother Ireland – and those of his personae in the poetry – imply that his nationalist endeavours subsume British colonial stereotypes by representing the land as of subordinated feminine existence. But

---

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404.

<sup>126</sup> Patricia Coughlan, 'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney', in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Michael Allen (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1997), p. 186.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Heaney does not go so far as to present Ireland as a woman in need for a masculine power to revive her. The poem is also less a mere retelling of the past wrongs committed against Mother Ireland. The scene or interaction we are presented with is depicted as mutual lovemaking: The queen invites the speaker to her bower, and he accepts this invitation. At the same time, she is conscious, sentient and ‘waiting’ for this very moment when she is unveiled. So, even if Heaney falls into gendered stereotypes, the speaker’s interaction with the queen is, unlike that of the arrogant, rapacious imperialists, characterised by some degree of reciprocity and anticipation. Furthermore, when positioned in relation to Glob’s book, Heaney’s speaker takes a certain risk since the figure of the bog body discovered at Haraldskjaer was intended to be pinned down in the bog land or else troubles may start all over again. Nonetheless, we find the speaker gently removing the body’s bindings. While those in the past were terrified of the return of this woman, Heaney’s speaker is shown to be willingly approaching, underpinning, and unwrapping her.

Ultimately, Heaney articulates a vision of Northern Ireland as a composite entity with intricate historical and cultural layers by layering images of Mother Ireland – the sacrifice-seeking Mother Goddess on the one hand and the victim of imperial conquest on the other – atop the figure of the bog body discovered at Haraldskjaer. The poet-speaker’s identity in this poem invites several interpretations, reflecting this composite identity: does he embody imperialist ideology that seeks to extract the resources of colonised nations, symbolised by the queen’s ‘Venus bone’? Or does he act in contrast to this, as his gentle interaction with the bog queen suggests an intention not to dominate her but perhaps to liberate the memories and traumas that have long been suppressed? Is he a martyr sacrificing himself to the consecrated bower/Ireland to ensure her fertility, or is he a groom for whom the queen awaits? This final instance is of particular resonance given the mythic emblems of Irish motherland. The

queen's conscious waiting and consent and the strong sensuous sexual imagery infused in the poems bring to mind the figure of the Sovereignty Lady, who James MacKillop identifies in his *Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* as a 'personification of the power and authority of a kingdom as a woman to be won sexually'.<sup>129</sup> In this mythical narrative, the king must mate with the divine female of sovereignty, the goddess of love and fertility, in her residence. This queen is believed to appear to a knight or hero as an ugly old woman asking to be loved. The rite of hierogamy ends when she receives love with him legitimised as a king and her becoming a beautiful young maiden.<sup>130</sup> Likewise, Heaney's speaker approaches a queen that is no longer a beautiful woman, but a mummified, partially decomposed corpse. She chooses him and invites him to her bower. He accepts, and as a result, fortune, fertility, and prosperity are ensured, as she possess golden, 'Venus bone'. With the contemporary context of the poem's title in mind, 'Come to the Bower' appears rather an invitation to Heaney, who had been exiled voluntarily years before publishing the poem, to visit the native bower.

Read this way, the poem builds up an image of a speaker that is native to the land by distinguishing him from foreign imperialist conquerors. Yet, where Heaney locates himself is never definite. While compiling all these historical allusions, Heaney also makes time leaps in a very subtle way so that it becomes hard to mark a certain chronology for the event. Such leaps enable the figure of the bog queen in the poem to be interpreted as a manifestation of all three representations of Mother Ireland. In a divided society, Heaney's conflation of the past and present time and geography adds to the indeterminacy of the positions he occupies. Heaney's bog poems present a myth of heterogeneity, they allow him to stand on what for

---

<sup>129</sup> James MacKillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 274, <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198609674.001.0001/acref-9780198609674>> [accessed 4 March 2024].

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

him is a neutral ground to contemplate the plurality of ideological standpoints he inherited as Northern Irish.

Similarly, the speaker of ‘Punishment’ finds himself participating in more than one viewpoint when confronted with a violent incident in Northern Ireland. The poem contemplates the punishment meted out to a suspected adulterous bog girl and Catholic Northern Irish girls,



Figure 3 ‘The young girl from the Windeby bog’ (Glob 111)

subjected to tarring and feathering by the IRA for associating with British Army members. Positioned amidst this atavistic violent punishment, the speaker is appalled but inactive, expressing a dual stance, portraying himself as one ‘who would connive | in civilized outrage | yet understand the exact | and tribal, intimate revenge’ (31). ‘Punishment’ is inspired by the actual archaeological discovery of the Windeby Girl found in Domland Fen at the end of July 1904.<sup>131</sup> Glob describes the girl as lying naked on her back inside the bog, her hair shaved off with a razor on the left side of the head, ‘with nothing but a collar of ox-hide round

her neck, and with bandaged eyes’.<sup>132</sup> Glob speculates that this girl suffered a violent death, possibly a judicial execution for adultery, drawing on Tacitus’s account of Iron Age punishment for women accused of adultery: ‘[t]he adulterous woman had her hair cut off in the presence of her relatives and was then scourged out of the village’.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>131</sup> Glob, p. 110.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

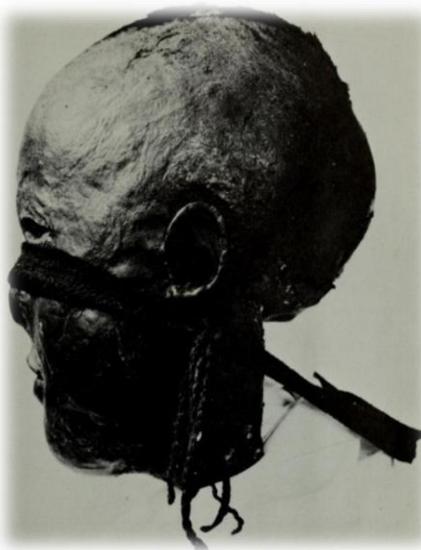


Figure 4 'The Windeby girl and the band with which she was blindfolded' (Glob 115)

The poem paints a close and intimate picture of the bog girl, detailing the harsh treatment she endured. Her 'neck' is tugged with a 'halter', her hair is shaved, and her eyes are blindfolded (30). Along the first five stanzas, Heaney establishes a profound connection and compassion for the girl, using the first-person 'I' to express, 'I can feel the tug | of the halter at the nape | of her neck', and 'I can see her drowned | body in the bog' (30). However, a deliberate emotional distance is maintained as he intermittently uses the third-person

possessive pronoun 'her' along with a series of figurative expressions that subtly cast an objectifying light on her remains. The wind, described as blowing 'her nipples | to amber beads' (30), emphasises the chilling exposure and the fossilization of her body. Comparing 'her ribs' to the 'frail rigging' (30) of a ship, he employs a nautical metaphor to capture the fragility of her physically undernourished condition. As he describes her drowned body in the bog, a tableau of her submerged existence emerges with 'the weighing stone, | the floating rods and boughs', under which 'she was a barked sapling' (30), conveying the image of her being stripped like a tree losing its leaves. This 'barked sapling' transforms into 'oak-bone, brain-firkin' (30), depicting her transformation from a vulnerable young tree to a petrified substance. Heaney's metaphorical language continues with the portrayal of 'her shaved head | like a stubble of black corn' (30), affirming her vulnerability and humiliation as her head had been shaved and rotten like an ear of black corn. Her 'blindfold' is a 'soiled bandage' (30), suggesting remnants of her execution and the degradation she faced, while 'her noose a ring | to store | the memories of love' (30) poignantly juxtaposes the brutality of her death with the

symbolism of a love-associated ring, highlighting the tragic irony of her fate. The poet navigates a delicate balance between forging an intimate connection with the victim and adopting a detached, dehumanising stance, thus delineating the dual and conflicting position he finds himself in – the tribal and the civilised.

In the sixth stanza, a shift occurs from the third-person possessive pronoun ‘her’, used in the opening stanzas to list her characteristics, to the second-person pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your’, creating a more direct address. This shift is accompanied by the poet adopting a personal tone, with language becoming increasingly intimate through the use of the first-person possessive ‘my’ and the personal pronoun ‘I’. This shift establishes a close connection to the victim, as seen in the poignant expression: ‘My poor scapegoat, | I almost love you’ (31). Here, the speaker not only acknowledges the girl as a victim brutalised by her tribe but also expresses deep pity by referring to her as ‘My poor scapegoat’ (31). This term draws a biblical allusion, referring to a rite of atonement where the sins of a community are placed upon a chosen sacrifice. He also addresses her as ‘Little adulteress’ (30) invoking another biblical theme of sin and punishment, evoking the traditional penalty for adultery being stoning. Compiling all these references, Heaney goes beyond merely aligning with the community advocating for the girl’s punishment to purge their collective sins; he consents her to be his scapegoat: chosen to atone for his own sins while recognising her innocence. The situation gets more complex when he confesses to almost loving her but admits he would not have intervened to prevent her punishment: ‘I almost love you | but would have cast, I know, | the stones of silence’ (31). Shifting its focus to a more contemporary context, the poem reveals that the speaker, mirroring his stance during the bog girl’s punishment, will maintain silence as her Irish ‘betraying sisters’ (31) confront similar consequences. Heaney candidly acknowledges his complicit silence and reluctance to speak out against the inhumanity these women suffer.

Given their disloyalty to the tribe, he fully understands the justification behind this ‘exact | and tribal, intimate revenge’ (31). This inclination toward silence explains why, in depicting these victimised women, he adopts a certain detached mode, although recognising that it implicates him in ‘civilized outrage’ (31).

Critics have considered Heaney’s analogy of the IRA’s punishments and Iron Age ritual killing as a passive, justificatory, or even approving treatment of violence. This has proved a manifold criticism since not only was Heaney criticised for normalising violence, particularly for suggesting that the tribal retribution is a common practice and will keep happening (Carson), but also, for locating the source of violence beyond sectarian division, which renders it symbolic of a fundamental identity of the Irish race (Lloyd). In particular, the final lines of the poem have enticed a great deal of critical debate as to what they amount to in relation to sectarian violence.

I who have stood dumb

when your betraying sisters,

cauled in tar,

wept by the railings,

who would connive

in civilized outrage

yet understand the exact

and tribal, intimate revenge (31).

It is mainly for these lines that Carson calls Heaney ‘the laureate of violence’ and ‘an apologist for the situation’. Blake Morrison aligns himself with Carson, observing that

Heaney's 'poetry grants sectarian killing in Northern Ireland a historical respectability [...] if not a justification, then at least an 'explanation'.<sup>134</sup> Yet, I believe that Heaney's portrayal of the speaker's conflicted sentiments transcends a mere understanding or justifying cyclical tribal revenge. If the speaker was a supporter of the barbaric treatment of women, he would likely be either an ideologically preconceived raging revenger or else an indifferent observer, not an empathetic, silent voyeur and a self-aware sinner who stands among the revengers, navigating the merit of dumbly thinking and behaving according to the values of his tribe on the one hand and conniving in what he describes as a civilised outrage on the other.

Nathan Suhr-Sytsma's analysis of 'Punishment' examines how Heaney's ambivalence toward British media coverage of the Troubles shaped the poem. He highlights key techniques that convey this ambivalence, including the poem's use of an 'apostrophe to the victim'.<sup>135</sup> By addressing the dead victim directly, Suhr-Sytsma argues, the poem departs from the detached tone typical of prose journalism.<sup>136</sup> Suhr-Sytsma also highlights the poem's use of 'the second-person pronoun', thus illustrating what Jonathan Culler terms as the "triangulated address"—a technique where the poet indirectly addresses the reader by speaking to another figure.<sup>137</sup> This technique, according to Suhr-Sytsma, transforms the poem's descriptive elements into 'an almost claustrophobic intimacy', giving the poem an "almost love" quality; this intimacy, in turn, 'resonates with the poet's distrust of journalistic impersonality in the face of violence'.<sup>138</sup> Suhr-Sytsma traces Heaney's ambivalence to a comment the poet made before publishing 'Punishment', where he observed that ancient commentators like the Roman historian Tacitus and modern journalists in the *Daily Telegraph* tend to reflect on

---

<sup>134</sup> Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 68.

<sup>135</sup> Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, 'Publishing the Troubles', p. 191.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

incidents of violence with a detached tone. As Heaney himself puts it, these incidents “are observed with amazement and a kind of civilised tut-tut by Tacitus in the first century and by leader-writers in the *Daily Telegraph* in the 20th century”.<sup>139</sup> Although Heaney’s compositional process of ‘Punishment’ has reworked Tacitus’s ‘civilised tut-tut’ into less direct expressions such as the ‘civilized outrage’ we have in the published version in *North*, Suhr-Sytsma remarks that Heaney’s association of the astonished, rather detached civilised disapproval of violence with both ‘the bygone empire of Rome and the latter-day empire of London’ is the precise cause of his hesitancy to ‘fully endorse such “outrage”’.<sup>140</sup> Given the speaker’s empathetic attitude towards violence and his eventual shift from voyeurism, complicit silence to self-criticism, I would add that the final stanza of ‘Punishment’ becomes more indicative of the two-mindedness of the speaker, rather than what some readers may interpret as his unequivocal endorsement of the nationalist narrative. As the poem concludes, the speaker admits he ‘would connive | in civilised outrage | yet understand the exact | and tribal, intimate revenge’ (31). This admission reflects his position between both tribal and civilized spaces, resisting a one-sided perspective and instead engaging with the complexities of both viewpoints in his poetic reflection.

In another critique, David Lloyd accused Heaney of using ritual parallels to create an identification that ‘elides’ differences, resulting in a ‘metaphorical foreclosure of issues’, particularly those related to colonialism which continues to control the voices of the formerly colonised.<sup>141</sup> Lloyd interprets Heaney’s bog poems, especially ‘Punishment’ as an attempt to retrieve consciousness of his personal and tribal pasts, categorising it as a bourgeois form of identifying with the other to appropriate it. Despite Heaney’s incorporation of ‘high culture

---

<sup>139</sup> qtd in Suhr-Sytsma, p. 192.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Lloyd, “Pap for the Dispossess’d”, p. 333.

and regional identity', Lloyd argues that these elements perpetuate 'the continuing meshing of Irish cultural nationalism with the imperial ideology which frames it'.<sup>142</sup> If Lloyd is correct in suggesting that Heaney's main concern is not the external pressures of colonialism that play a role in triggering conflict and violence but the precolonial society and how certain very problematic faultiness still exists in modern Irish society, then what Heaney is doing, controlled by the voices of the 'civilized' coloniser, is self-stereotyping the Irish nationalist identity as repeatedly, fixedly violent.

But the ills of Nerthus and her people are not specifically Irish. Additionally, while it may be tempting to assume that Heaney implies a continuity that 'elides' differences, this overlooks the fact that he references four cases in the poem (the Windeby girl, the little adulteress, the scapegoat, and the Northern Irish sisters). The argument asserting parallel tribal punishments in both Northern Ireland and ancient Jutland seems grounded solely on presumptions that the bog girl provides an archetypal ground sufficient to identify the Irish girls with her. The poem, however, presents an interplay of viewpoints from discrepant times and places, which again underscores Heaney's view of the Northern Irish identity as composite. He layers contemporary attitudes over concepts from the Iron Age bog era while also incorporating biblical allusions, such as that of the 'little adulteress'. This final inclusion transforms the idea of tribal punishment from one of violence into one of injustice. The reference to the 'little adulteress' underscores a shift to public punishment carried out by those who lack the moral purity to judge others, thereby adding a new dimension to the exploration of justice and retribution. Likewise, the 'scapegoat' who dies and saves others cannot be equated with the one who is killed and made to bear the brunt of the community's violence. By the same token, the modern idea of punishment differs from that of the Iron Age: adultery is not betrayal, and

---

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 340.

being killed differs from being tarred and feathered. In this way, Heaney does more than strike a parallel between two disparate histories. He explores the past and imbues it with a contemporary context and vice versa, creating a metaphor to negotiate society's approach to punishing the guilty. The speaker, whom we can safely identify with the poet, transmigrates through different times and places to express a contemporary dilemma that exposes his two-mindedness.

### A moral maze: can violence ever be art?

The two poems 'The Grauballe Man' and 'Strange Fruit' highlight the poet-speaker's ethical dilemma regarding portraying violently sacrificed victims as artifacts, raising concerns about how his beautifying depictions may obscure historical brutality and contemporary suffering. Heaney, in these poems, reflects on the complex relationship between art and life, contemplating the impact of poetry on political reality and vice versa. Critics, like Henry Hart and Edna Longley, have voiced reservations about Heaney's empathetic portrayal of these figures: Hart is wary of Heaney's manifestation of empathy with these figures, noting that the poet regards their Christlike sacrifice as necessary death to bless the harvest, drawing Heaney into the collective Irish unconscious.<sup>143</sup> Similarly, Edna Longley considers Heaney's depiction of these sacrifices as prototypical in that it elevates the victim to make them 'a scapegoat, privileged victim, and ultimately Christ-surrogate, whose death and bizarre resurrection might redeem, or symbolise redemption'.<sup>144</sup> However, I argue that Heaney's representation of these sacrificial victims reveals a duality in his attitude towards them, and by extension, towards Irish martyrs, unsure whether to idealise the archaeological item they

---

<sup>143</sup> Hart, 'History, Myth, and Apocalypse', p. 402.

<sup>144</sup> Edna Longley, "North": 'Inner Émigré' or 'Artful Voyeur?' in Tony Curtis, ed., *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, 2nd edn. (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1985), p. 42.

became or beatify their sacrificial deaths.

‘The Grauballe Man’ originates from Glob’s narrative of a remarkable bog figure discovered in 1952 by peat-cutters from Grauballe.<sup>145</sup> He is identified as a victim of a ritualistic practice during the Iron Age, which is rooted in the belief that the union of the fertility goddess Nerthus and a man, a bridegroom, would ensure fertile land and bountiful crops for the upcoming season. The cause of death was clearly neither hanging nor strangulation, but a long cut that ‘ran round the front of the neck practically from ear to ear, so deep that the gullet was completely severed’.<sup>146</sup> This resulted in the expression ‘of pain and terror’ evident in the man’s ‘puckered forehead, eyes, mouth, and twisted posture’, while his head, somewhat flattened by the weight of the old, thick peat layer, shows the impact of centuries of pressure.<sup>147</sup> Unlike comparable finds, such as the already-mentioned Viking queen, no trace of clothing or any accompanying objects were found with the naked male body in its resting place, making it challenging to establish a firm deposition date.<sup>148</sup> However, scientific techniques, including flora analysis and radiology, led Glob to conclude that the event occurred during the Roman Iron Age, approximately 400 years before the birth of Christ.<sup>149</sup>

Upon an examination of the man’s last meal, which consisted of various cultivated grains and weed seeds – a collection more indicative of winter seeds and grains than an exclusively vegetarian diet, as suggested by the condition of the man’s teeth, Glob justifiably concludes that this man was likely a sacrifice offered to the fertility goddess, given the resemblance of his last meal to those prepared for other chosen sacrifices.<sup>150</sup> In addition to photographs and

---

<sup>145</sup> Glob., p. 37.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-47.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

radiographs, Glob provides a vivid, detailed description of the man's posture and preservation conditions. He 'lay slightly aslant' on his chest, with his head and upper body raised, left foot extended, and right hand and leg bent; his skin exhibited a uniform dark brown, tanned hue, and his hair turned red brown because of the effects of the bog-water; his eyes were slightly screwed up and his skull was possibly fractured as he may have been rendered unconscious before his throat was cut, while the clear line patterns of his hands were clear and his 'feet were sharp as they were formed in the embryo'.<sup>151</sup>



Figure 5 'The first picture of the Grauballe Man'  
Glob (38)

Heaney attempts a vivid poetic recreation of these details, using a sequence of metaphoric equivalences that evoke a unity between the man and the land in which he lay buried, bringing forth narratives of marriages between Nerthus and her grooms. His tone is contemplative, almost reverential, conveying a mix of fascination and respect, as well as an underlying sense of melancholy as he explores the tension between the beautiful physicality of the man's corpse and the brutality of his death. The chain of nature-inspired metaphors recaptures several parts of the bog-

preserved man, imagining him as a fluid entity, 'poured | in tar', lying 'on a pillow of turf | and seems to weep | the black river of himself' (28). The metaphoric unity between the man and the bog deepens as he gradually turns into substance, with

---

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-49.

The grain of his wrists

is like bog oak,

the ball of his heel

like a basalt egg.

[...]

His hips are the ridge

and purse of a mussel,

his spine an eel arrested

under a glisten of mud (28).

These serene, nature-infused images dissolve in the fifth stanza, as the poet abruptly shifts focus to the man's head, which is described as lifting while 'the chin is a visor' above 'his slashed throat' (28). This description captures the gruesome nature of the man's death. Still, Heaney's tone amid the fearful sight remains reverent. He observes the man's 'cured wound', suggesting he has retained some life under the bog while 'tanned and toughened' flesh 'opens inwards to a dark | elderberry place' (28). The deliberate choice of a spring crop like elderberry is indicative of the prospect of prosperity and renewal, given that the man's last meal consisted of winter seed.

This is a moment of confusion as Heaney seems puzzled by the lifelike cast of the corpse:

Who will say ‘corpse’  
to his vivid cast?  
Who will say ‘body’  
to his opaque repose? (29)

These rhetorical questions underscore the tension surrounding the aesthetic portrayal of the violently sacrificed victim, challenging the idea of reducing this elaborate artifact to a mere corpse. The subsequent lines cultivate a sense of renewal, comparing the Grauballe Man’s rusted hair to a newborn’s, rugged like ‘a mat unlikely | as a foetus’s’ (29), juxtaposing the weathered, matured body with imagery from the early stages of life.

Heaney contrasts the initial shock of encountering the photograph displaying the man’s ‘twisted face’, ‘a head and shoulder | out of the peat, | bruised like a forceps baby’, with his ‘perfected’ memory of the man, laying ‘down to the red horn’ (29). Heaney pauses to reflect on the repercussions of carrying out such aestheticization of dead victims. It seems that the perfected memory of the Grauballe Man’s photograph exemplifies another form of Tacitus’s ‘tut-tut civilized’ representation, now granted by Glob’s photographic shot, which subsequently influences Heaney; this staged display elevates the lifeless body from being a mere victim of ‘tribal’ violence to a mesmerising artifact. On a scale of ‘beauty and atrocity’, thus, Heaney measures the mangled, yet artistically described remains of the Grauballe Man with ‘the actual weight’ this victim bears, which the poet finds resemblant to the pain of ‘the Dying Gaul | too strictly compassed | on his shield’ (29). Heaney extends beyond his bog-anchored spatial and temporal compass to reach not only the Hellenistic sculpture of the wounded Celtic warrior Dying Gaul but ‘each hooded victim, | slashed and dumped’ (29).

Similar to the bog poems I discussed earlier, ‘The Grauballe Man’ is woven from a complex web of references that reflects the composite locality of Northern Ireland. This poem is informed first by Glob’s textual observations and photographs of a man from the Jutland town of Grauballe. The Grauballe Man finds a corollary in the figure of the Dying Gaul, who, in turn, is analogous to contemporary Catholic I.R.A. fighters executed by the Ulster Defence Association (U.D.A.), a Protestant paramilitary group which was involved in violent actions against the Catholic community. Tim Pat Coogan recounts this grim reality, noting that from 1972 to 1974, a wave of violence occurred wherein ‘[s]cores of young Catholics were found with hoods over their heads and bullets through their brains’.<sup>152</sup> However, Heaney’s choice to use the word ‘each’ to describe the hooded victims, rather than specifying their religious or regional identity, highlights his intention to universalise the implications of such brutality. By placing these victims on the scale of ‘beauty and atrocity’, then, Heaney creates a tension between the gruesome reality of violent acts and the unsettling beauty that can emerge from our desensitisation or glorification of them. Heaney confronts the moral implications arising from neglecting the actual weight they carry in favour of enjoying the archaeological artifacts they become, the poetic images they present, or even the interesting materials they offer to historians and media reporters. It is a moment where Heaney appears self-critical of the emblematic approach, the artistic response he chose over a direct address to the violence of the Troubles.

In ‘Strange Fruit’, Heaney explores more of what it is like to reflect on victims of violence and beatify their deaths, drawing inspiration mainly from the photograph of the unsettling discovery of ‘the decapitated girl from Roum’ in 1942, found during peat-cutting

---

<sup>152</sup> Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA: A History* (Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1993), p. 339, <<https://archive.org/details/irahistory00coog>>, [accessed 2 August 2024].

in Roum Fen in Himmerland.<sup>153</sup> Glob's textual observations describe her 'oval', severed head as delicately preserved and carefully wrapped in 'sheepskin', noting that it was 'probably a sacrificial offering': 'it was found in a little cauldron-bog from which ancient clothing and artifacts, deposited as sacrificial offerings to the divine powers'.<sup>154</sup> The severed head takes on similar symbolic importance in Celtic pagan religion, a concept Heaney once found referenced by Celtic scholar Anne Ross, which she considers a symbol "which, in its way, sums up the whole of Celtic pagan religion and is as representative of it as is, for example, the sign of the cross in Christian contexts".<sup>155</sup> Heaney's use of the severed head to layer Iron Age, Celtic, and Christological significations illustrates his perception of a composite locality underlying Northern Irish identity. By integrating the severed head with multiple historical and cultural layers, Heaney creates a dialogue between ancient and modern, pagan and sacred perspectives on sacrifice, reverence, and violence. Heaney begins with the dramatic image of the severed head, drawing on Glob's textual and photographic accounts that evoke a pre-Christian Northern Irish cultural identity. He enriches the poem with elements of Celtic paganism and Catholicism from Northern Ireland, drawing from Anne Ross and admitting a degree of 'reverence' for the cross-like severed head.

In fact, the poem's initial draft, titled 'My reverence', is rich with Eucharistic imagery that enhances Ross's interpretation of the head's symbolism. Gail McConnell's examination of the poem's composition history reveals Heaney's intention to depict the beheaded girl as 'Christ in the Mass'.<sup>156</sup>

---

<sup>153</sup> Glob. 100.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> qtd in Heaney 'Feeling into Words', p. 57.

<sup>156</sup> Gail McConnell, 'Heaney and the Photograph: "Strange Fruit" in Manuscript and Published Form', *Irish University Review*, 47 (2017), p. 438, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26537695>> [accessed 1 August 2024].

This was her body.

This was her blood.

~~Elevate~~ This is a monstrance

for her exposition.<sup>157</sup>

In these lines, Heaney aligns the beheaded girl with the sacramental presence of Christ, suggesting that her death carries a sacrificial, sanctified quality akin to the Eucharist in Christian ritual.

Ultimately, Heaney removed this stanza from the final published version of the poem, signalling a shift from specific religious symbolism to a portrayal of the beheaded girl with broader, more universal appeal. This shift is also reflected in the poem's evolving title. Gail McConnell points out that Heaney's drafts show a progression from a handwritten draft titled 'My reverence' to various typescripts with titles such as 'TRICEPS' and 'RELIQUARY', before adopting 'TETE COUPEE' and finally crossing it out in favour of 'STRANGE FRUIT'.<sup>158</sup> This final title, according to McConnell, aligns the poem with Abel Meeropol's poem 'Strange Fruit', which was inspired by a haunting 'photograph of a lynching in which the bodies of two black men hang from trees above a crowd of spectators'.<sup>159</sup> Published in the mid-1930s, Meeropol's poem was later set to music and famously recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939.<sup>160</sup> In this way, Heaney's poem becomes a universal reflection on violence, linking ancient rituals with the haunting echoes of injustice endured by marginalised and oppressed

---

<sup>157</sup> The draft titled 'My reverence' included many crossed-out words, phrases, and lines, indicating extensive reworking. For more on the significance of these revisions see Gail McConnell's 'Heaney and the Photograph', p. 438.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 434.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 432.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

peoples across different eras and cultures. Here, I would stress that Heaney's reworking of the severed head image, an example of local element in my thesis, does not diminish its cultural specificity. Instead, it illustrates how such an element, when recontextualised and layered to bear the imprint of a contemporary and universal engagement, can amplify its accessibility and resonance on a broader scale without losing its local significance.

In addition to the evolution of titles, Heaney also experimented with the poem's form, length, and structure. For instance, the draft titled 'TRICEPS' was composed of three sections, each with 'five squat quatrains', while 'RELIQUARY' consisted of four stanzas of varying lengths.<sup>161</sup> In the final version published in *North*, Heaney chose the sonnet form to express his love, which begins 'to feel like reverence', (32) for the girl. Her beauty is unusual; so, Heaney subverts the sonnet's typical rhyme scheme and iambic regularity to impart an emotional resonance that is unpredictable and unsettling. Although the poem qualifies as a



Figure 6 'The decapitated girl from Roum' (Glob 99)

sonnet by its fourteen-line structure, it resists easy classification as either Shakespearean or Petrarchan due to its irregular rhyme scheme and the absence of clear structural breaks or a distinct volta. I propose that the poem represents a structurally subverted Shakespearean sonnet. By 'structurally subverted', I mean that the poet alters the traditional sonnet structure from three quatrains followed by a couplet to a couplet followed by three quatrains. While a traditional couplet is typically defined by rhyme and meter,

---

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 434.

the term can also apply to two lines that function together to form a complete thought or image, even in the absence of rhyme. In this poem, I suggest that the first two lines, although unrhymed, have the feel of a couplet because of their cohesive simile, which compares the girl's decapitated head to 'an exhumed gourd' that is 'Oval-faced, prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth' (32). This simile conveys the head's aged appearance; the skin, akin to a prune, is wrinkled and shrivelled in texture, while the teeth exhibit a worn, discoloured quality. In this sense, the lack of rhyme and the decision to place the couplet at the beginning of the sonnet, rather than at the end where couplets traditionally appear, are likely deliberate choices. These choices underscore the unsettling nature of the imagery, breaking away from the traditional sonnet form to reflect the poem's dark and disturbing subject matter.

Together, these two lines also set the tone of the poem, with the narrator guiding the reader to look at the girl's head, using the spatial marker 'Here':

Here is the girl's head like an exhumed gourd.

Oval-faced, prune-skinned, prune-stones for teeth' (32).

The use of the word 'Here' suggests a presentation or exhibition, imparting a tour-like quality to the poem and prompting a contemplative exploration of the girl's physicality. There is a prevailing detached, exhibitive tone in the poem, making it unclear whether the narrator sympathises with the suffering represented by this preserved head. The reader, too, is implicated in this attempt to step back from personal involvement, often rushed by the reporting narrative voice to observe how 'They unswaddled the wet fern of her hair | And made an exhibition of its coil'; how they let 'her leathery beauty' be exposed to 'air'; and how they used 'Pash of tallow' to preserve this 'perishable treasure' (32). Clearly, Heaney is referring to the special preservative processes conducted in museums where, according to

Glob, the discovered body gets a month's bath in oil and distilled water 'followed by drying in air, in the course of which gradual impregnation with glycerine, lanolin and cod liver oil was carried out'.<sup>162</sup> Again, scientific preservative methods, as in the case of the photographic shot of the Grauballe Man, transforms the girl from being a victim of tribal, sacrificial practices into a museum object, an artifact.

Caught in the act of savouring the artifact she became, the narrator confronts us with a reference to 'Diodorus Siculus', who, we are told, 'confessed | His gradual ease among the likes of this' head, with its 'broken nose' 'dark as a turf clod', and 'eyeholes blank as pools in the old workings' (32). In her exploration of pagan Celtic religions, Anna Ross notes that the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus is known for documenting the Gaul's practice of decapitating enemies, detailing 'how they nailed them up on their houses or embalmed them in oil and regarded them as priceless treasures'.<sup>163</sup> Heaney's reference to Siculus's confession of gradual familiarity with such brutal scenes is, therefore, representative of another variation of the insensitive 'tut-tut civilized' treatment of violence. Much like Tacitus's objective historical accounts, the detached reporting style of British journalism, staged photographs by Glob, scientific mummification techniques, and Heaney's own emblematic portrayals, Siculus reflects an indifferent approach to victims of violence. Initially inviting us to see the girl as a museum object rather than a sacrificial offering, Heaney shifts to a more authentic account to capture her suffering. In the closing quatrain, he labels her as a 'Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible | Beheaded girl' (32). Now, she appears defiantly 'outstaring' both the 'axe', the sacrificial tool used in her killing, and the attempt at 'beatification, [...] | What had begun to feel like reverence' (32), the tribal goal behind her sacrifice. Heaney admitted in

---

<sup>162</sup> Glob, p. 59.

<sup>163</sup> Anne Ross, *Everyday Life of the Pagan Celts* (London: Botsford, 1970). p. 155.

*Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* that this poem ‘had ended at first with a kind of reverence, and the voice that came in when I revised was a rebuke to the literary quality of that reverent emotion’.<sup>164</sup> Heaney might be accused of succumbing to his Catholic, tribal predisposition, potentially mythologizing the girl into a saintly figure. However, this move is a deliberate counteraction to the objective tone seen in the likes of Siculus. Heaney avoids exclusively turning victims of violence into either martyrs or artifacts. Rather, he acknowledges the multiple perspectives held by his speaker, which, we may infer, reflect Heaney’s own views. Both the speaker and Heaney participate in, yet also disavow, the unsettling Catholic, tribal reverence for the victims on the one hand and the equally troubling, insensitive artistic treatment of them on the other.

## Conclusion

Let’s round off this chapter by examining the final poem in the bog sequence, ‘Kinship’, which I find exemplary in its navigation through layers of memories accumulating above and around the Irish bog. The poem opens with the poet-speaker wandering in a peat bog, where he feels a profound affinity, stating that he is ‘Kinned [...] | to the strangled victim’ (33). As he ‘step[s] through origins’, he likens his reflections on this intimate bond with the sacrificial victim to a dog recalling ‘memories of the wilderness | on the kitchen mat’ (33). This initial simile, juxtaposing untamed and domestic settings, foreshadows a contrasting interplay between primal and civilised outlooks towards the land and its sacrificial inheritance – an interplay that Heaney has explored throughout *North* and will further dramatize in the final section of this concluding poem with a direct address to Tacitus. ‘Kinship’ progresses in six

---

<sup>164</sup>John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 61.

sequences, each adding a layer to the complex relationship between the speaker and the bog landscape and its legacy. These sequences gradually build an image of the bog as a repository for history and culture, whereby references from the ancient rituals to the contemporary reflections on Irish national identity seamlessly intertwine. Here, the bog is compared to a ‘love-nest in the bracken’ (33), an ‘Insatiable bride’ (34), capturing its enchanting influence on the narrator, ‘I’ in the poem. However, this same ‘I’ takes on an intrusive role upon finding ‘a turf-spade | hidden under bracken’ (35). As the tool is raised, ‘the soft lips of the growth | muttered and split, | a tawny rut | opening at my feet | like a shed skin’ (35), symbolising a colonial invasion that disrupts the purity of the serene bog. The turf-spade is also a digging tool that local Irish turf-cutters have used for generations, giving the poet-speaker’s intrusion a double interpretation, highlighting the broader implications of his disruption of the bog’s tranquillity. Whether internal, external, or a blend of both, the act of repositioning the turf-spade, of sinking ‘it upright’ in the ‘love-nest’ (35), leads to the successful resurrection of Mother Goddess, with the poet-speaker standing ‘at the edge of centuries | facing a goddess’ (36). This act is, in fact, not purely individual; nor is it only in the present time. The turf-spade repositioned initiates the creation of ‘steam in the sun’, conjuring an image of a Celtic population, referred to as ‘they’, erecting an ‘obelisk: | among the stones, under a bearded cairn’ (35). The poem’s fluidity in shifting between first and third person, as well as changes in tense weaves the past into present and the personal into public.

Heaney does not evoke the bog legacy because he sees the Iron Age and contemporary Northern Ireland as identical, but because, as he pictures it in this poem, it makes a ‘centre’ that both ‘holds and spreads’ (36), forming a space of complex intersections of liminal places, historical temporalities, and multiple positions. Indeed, Heaney’s view of the world the bog

offers contrasts Yeats's centre where 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold'.<sup>165</sup> While Yeats's line captures a world where structures collapse and lead to anarchy and uncertainty, Heaney's centre is intact and foster continual growth and renewal, even in the middle of processes of deterioration and rebirth. The poem delves into more human elements, referencing 'The hand-carved felloes | of the turf-cart wheels | buried in a litter | of turf mould' (37); these lines pay homage to the toil and craftsmanship of those who once worked the land. The graceful curve of the cart's 'tail-board', resembling 'cupid's bow', and the curved 'lips | of the cribs', set into sockets, captivates the speaker: he 'deified the man | who rode there', considering him a deity, the guardian 'of the waggon' (37).

Following this celebratory moment, Heaney introduces a different discourse associated with civilization, reason, and justice, invoking 'Tacitus' to observe how he, the speaker, creates a sacred 'grove' upon 'an old crannog | piled by the fearful dead' (38). This line is a deliberate response to Tacitus's depiction in *Germania*, where he describes the tribes 'in an island of Ocean', worshipers of Nerthus, whose sacred grove becomes a place where 'the sacrifice in public of a human victim' marks the birth of the nation.<sup>166</sup> Elizabeth Cullingford interprets this response as a parallel Heaney draws between these 'primitive rites' and 'the republican devotees' who perished for 'the Irish goddess Cathleen ni Houlihan' during the 1916 Easter Rising.<sup>167</sup> A 'desolate peace' ensues, staining 'Our mother ground' 'with the blood | of her faithful' inhabitants (38). This time, Heaney references Tacitus's *Agricola*, where the British chief Calgacus condemns Roman invaders: 'Robbery, butchery, rapine, the liars call Empire;

---

<sup>165</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Wordsworth Editions, 2000), p. 158.

<sup>166</sup> Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Tacitus on Britain and Germany: A Translation of the Agricola and the Germania*, translated, and introduced by H. Mattingly (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948), p. 133.

<sup>167</sup> Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, 'British Romans and Irish Carthaginians: Anticolonial Metaphor in Heaney, Friel, and McGuinness', *PMLA*, 111 (1996), p. 228, doi.10.2307/463103.

they create a desolation and call it peace'.<sup>168</sup> Ironically, this positions 'the formerly colonized Celtic Britons' as the current 'colonizers', according to Cullingford.<sup>169</sup>

Considering Tacitus's 'civilized tut-tut' perspective, the speaker implores him to revisits this "island of the ocean" (38) with greater fairness and perhaps empathy:

report us fairly,  
how we slaughter  
for the common good  
[...]  
how the goddess swallows  
our love and terror (38-39).

If Heaney freely leans towards his Catholic predispositions in these closing lines of 'Kinship', he, as illustrated throughout this chapter, has in other instances in *North* disowned these inclinations, aligning with Tacitus's civilised fortifications. After all, Heaney's approach to depicting episodes of violence in the North is far from simplistic. He moves between presenting it as a disturbing historical and contemporary reality and exploring its potentially fruitful implications – fruitful because victims of violence are not just casualties of atavistic sacrificial and sectarian killings but figures worthy of reverence as well as potential artifacts. Heaney's tone, therefore, varies from reverential to detached reporting and, at times, even aestheticizing the grim realities. He also weaves a complex narrative where violence is a betrayal and disturbance to Mother Earth, yet occasionally seems generative for renewal.

---

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

Politically, Heaney refuses to cast his Catholic Irish peers solely as innocent victims to the villainy of colonialism. Both contribute, in one way or another, to the cumulative intrusive disturbances that led to the Troubles. The northern landscape Heaney describes in his collection is not confined to a one-sided perspective but rather a liminal space where multiple positions intersect and diverge, offering to the reader a nuanced account of the region's history and conflicts.

## Chapter Three: Christopher Okigbo: From Ancestral Beliefs to Modern African Consciousness

I think that over the years I have tried to evolve my own personal religion. The way that I worship my gods is in fact through poetry. [...] The creative process is a process of cleansing. And since I began actively to write poetry, I have never gone to church. So, I don't think it would be right for me to say I am a Christian or I am a pagan. I think my own religion combines elements from both.<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Okigbo (1930-1967) adopts poetry as a syncretic rite, a personal code of worship that weaves together threads of his local inheritance with the Christianity introduced by colonialism, fashioning a cohesive belief system reflective of his self-perception as a poet. By pitting 'the creative process' against organised spirituality, Okigbo makes it clear that his 'personal religion' necessarily involves forsaking established orthodoxy for the sake of a creative expression that harmonises the polytheistic formations of his ancestors with the monotheism of Christianity within a modernist aesthetics suitable for his experience.

Okigbo's syncretism, nonetheless, aims to be exuberant; it is intended to be a celebration of the cross-religious inheritance of Africa. For Okigbo, identity is a fluid and dynamic construct, continually evolving through the interplay of local and colonial influences. His dual exposure, therefore, did not result in a stalemate between the two cultures, but rather encouraged the formation of a productive, positive space capable of embracing the multiple and even conflicting aspects of the blended culture he lived in. In fact, Okigbo perceived no

---

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Okigbo in Marjory Whitelaw, 'Interview with Christopher Okigbo, 1965', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 5:1 (1970), p. 31.

inherent conflict between his Christian faith and his Igbo cultural heritage, but rather viewed them as complementary pathways leading to the same destination. He commented that 'I never experienced any conflict whatsoever' between the reverence for Igbo deities and Catholicism: '[i]t is just a way of going to the same place by two different routes'.<sup>2</sup> His colonial upbringing, moreover, did not necessarily create feelings of alienation; rather, he asserts a deep-rooted sense of belonging to his society and a continuity with his ancestral gods: 'I have always belonged to my society, and I've never felt uprooted from it. I do not feel that as a Christian I have been uprooted from my own village gods'.<sup>3</sup> He also believed his ancestral gods continued to protect him, and that, by and large, Christian and traditional Igbo practices are 'aspects of the same power, the same force'.<sup>4</sup> Turning to poetry as a new way of existence, Okigbo, then, transcends fixed cultural constructs in favour of something larger, different, and more dynamic. Anchored in ancestral tradition, his cross-religious syncretism merges his Christian identity and shapes his self-perception as a modern African poet.

The local evoked by Okigbo is grounded in his position as a priest of river goddess Idoto. She is, he describes, 'the earth mother, and also the mother of the whole family'.<sup>5</sup> This important role was passed down to him through reincarnation, wherein he inherited the sacred duties of his maternal grandfather, the preceding priest at the Ajani shrine dedicated to Idoto. As Okigbo once recounted:

---

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Okigbo, in Robert Serumaga, 'Interviewing Christopher Okigbo', London, July 1965, an extract in *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*, ed. by Donatus Ibe Nwoga (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984), p. 249.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Okigbo in Marjory Whitelaw, p. 36.

My maternal grandfather was the head of a particular type of religion [...] and since I am a reincarnation of my maternal grandfather, I carried this on, and I began to show them my responsibilities in that direction as soon as I grew up; ... And my *Heavensgate* is, in fact, designed to do that sort of thing.<sup>6</sup>

*Heavensgate* (1962) is a poetry collection that Okigbo wrote to fulfil the ritual obligations of his role as a priest to Idoto.<sup>7</sup> His decision to preserve Igbo spirituality through poetry is, likewise his comment on substituting church service with poetry, a demonstration of his belief in the cleansing and spiritual power of artistic creation. Poetry, to Okigbo, is not a tool for expressing devotion; it is a spiritual practice itself. Just as a chief priest has specific responsibilities within a religious context, Okigbo considered his role as a poet with a similar sense of duty and purpose. He recalls that '[i]n 1958, when I started taking poetry very seriously, it was as though I had felt a sudden call to begin performing my full functions, as chief priest of Idoto'.<sup>8</sup>

In *Heavensgate*, Okigbo invokes mother Idoto, but strategically shifts her from her earthly location as a river goddess to the gateway of the heavenly realm, as subtly hinted by the title of the collection. This deliberate relocation is an early instance of Okigbo's reworking of the local Igbo cosmological worldview, which, as I will later explain, holds the mother goddess principle in reverence. By situating her in the heavens, Okigbo extends the feminine, maternal ontology of Idoto to juxtapose the fatherly, patriarchal essence of the Lord in Christianity. This juxtaposition of Igbo and Christian spheres recurs throughout *Heavensgate*, most notably

<sup>6</sup> Okigbo, in Robert Serumaga, 'Interviewing Christopher Okigbo', p. 249.

<sup>7</sup> In this chapter, I reference the republished version of *Heavensgate*, which included, in addition to the 'Introduction', *Limits* (1964), *Silences* (1965), and the new sequence *Distances*, all collectively reissued after his death under the title *Labyrinths* (1971).

<sup>8</sup> Okigbo in Marjory Whitelaw, p. 36.

in the introit, the initial segment of the mass involving the confession and purification of the poet-celebrant:

BEFORE YOU, mother Idoto,

naked I stand;

before your watery presence,

a prodigal

leaning on an oilbean,

lost in your legend.<sup>9</sup>

In this part, the celebrant stands in a local ritual site, invoking Idoto while leaning on the ‘oilbean’. Oilbean trees, Stella Okoye-Ugwu tells us, are sacred tree found in most shrines in Igbo land; they are regarded as a totem, and ‘legend has it that the spirits of little children stay there to wait for kind women that would become their earthly mothers’.<sup>10</sup> This local setting is overlaid with a cluster of Christian references that Okigbo uses to formulate his prayer, such as the allusion to baptism in the cleansing process and the comparison of the poet-protagonist to the Christian guilt-ridden prodigal son, standing on the fringe of the gates of heaven, hoping for entry. Despite the colonial context, which could be considered the source of Idoto’s destruction at the hands of missionaries, Okigbo employs elements from his Catholicism to communicate with mother Idoto, invoking the idea of a Catholic mass and incorporating Judaeo-Christian liturgy. The linguistic correspondence between the introit of the poem and Psalm 130 highlights Okigbo’s endeavour to introduce mother Idoto to his

---

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Okigbo, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971; first publ. by Mbari, 1962), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Stella Okoye-Ugwu, and Oliver Nyambi (Reviewing editor), “‘beyond the limits of the dream’: Delineating the mythic and ritual sequence in Okigbo’s poetry” (*Cogent Arts and Humanities*, 8:1, 2021), p. 6, doi:10.1080/23311983.2021.1882070.

Catholic faith. Remorseful David implored: ‘Out of the depths I have cried unto Thee Lord, Lord hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication’, and ‘I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word, I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning’.<sup>11</sup> Okigbo’s prayer has similar vocabulary and structure: ‘Under your power wait I | on barefoot, | watchman for the watchword | at *Heavensgate*’, and ‘out of the depths my cry: | give ear and hearken’ (3).

In this chapter, I analyse *Heavensgate* arguing that it enacts Okigbo’s gradual development of poetry as a personal religion. Set in the local context of southeastern Nigeria, this five-sequence poem features a celebrant as its central figure. This poet-celebrant embarks on a mass-like ceremony, offered to the Igbo mother Idoto, to reestablish a spiritual conjunction with the belief system of his ancestors, or a reworked form thereof. As Okigbo indicates in his introductory remarks on the poem,

*Heavensgate* was originally conceived as an Easter sequence. It later grew into a ceremony of innocence, something like a mass, an offering to Idoto, the village stream of which I drank, in which I washed, as a child; the celebrant, a personage like Orpheus, is about to begin a journey. Cleansing involves total nakedness, a complete self-surrender to the water spirit that nurtures all creation. The various sections of the poem, therefore, present this celebrant at various stations of his cross.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> *The Holy Bible, King James Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), Ps. 130 <<https://www.bible.com/bible/1/PSA.130.KJV>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>12</sup> Okigbo, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*, p. xi.

The allusion to Orpheus in the context of my argument about Okigbo's view of poetry as worship is significant because it illuminates a mutual belief in the capacity of poetry to touch the divine. According to Mark P. O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon in their seminal work *Classical Mythology*, 'Orpheus exemplifies the universal power of the artist and in particular music and poetry'.<sup>13</sup> Orpheus is best known for his journey to the underworld. As narrated by the Roman poet Ovid, Orpheus, stricken with grief after losing his beloved wife Eurydice to a snake's bite, ventures into the realm of the dead to retrieve her: 'he passed among the thin ghosts, the wraiths of the dead, till he reached Persephone and her lord, who holds sway over these dismal regions, the king of the shades'.<sup>14</sup> There, Orpheus made a heart-wrenching plea, singing his words to the tune of his lyre:

Deities of this lower world, to which all we of mortal birth descend, [...] I beg you, by these awful regions, by this boundless chaos, and by the silence of your vast realms, weave again Eurydice's destiny, brought too swiftly to a close [...] I ask as a gift from you only the enjoyment of her; but if the fates refuse her a reprieve, I have made up my mind that I do not wish to return either. You may exult in my death as well as hers!<sup>15</sup>

Upon hearing this plea, 'the bloodless ghosts were in tears'; the rulers of the underworld were so moved by his song that '[t]he king and queen of the underworld could not bear to refuse his pleas', and, as a result, '[t]hey called Eurydice'.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Mark P. O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 7th edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 361.

<sup>14</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. by Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955) p. 225.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 225-226.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

Morford and Lenardon further posit that Orpheus was ‘a prophet, a priest, or, if you like, a saint, whose god was Apollo or Dionysus or both’ – Apollo is associated with ‘music, magic, and prophecy’, while ‘Orphic initiation and mysteries are by their very nature Dionysiac’.<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between music and religion in Orphism is elucidated by Morford and Lenardon, who assert that Orpheus’s hymns and doctrines provided a spiritual framework emphasising the transcendental power of music to connect the mortal realm with the divine.<sup>18</sup>

It is likely that this interplay between religion and art is what led Okigbo, the priest-poet, to identify with Orpheus. Indeed, the allusion to Orpheus introduces a classical dimension to Okigbo’s referential field, which also encompasses Christian and Igbo elements. In embarking on his mythical journey, Okigbo’s celebrant mirrors the trials and self-discovery characteristic of classical heroes. Just as Orpheus’s musical ability made the return of his deceased wife Eurydice to the land of the living possible, so do Okigbo’s poetic callings reunite him with Idoto. Okigbo’s *Heavensgate* is, nonetheless, context-specific: it features a poet-celebrant journeying towards the goddess of his cradleland. It also locates the overarching three-fold structure of rites of passage – signalled by its mass and monomyth quality - within the realms of Igbo cosmology and histories of colonisation.

Okigbo’s journey towards retrieving his goddess begins with a ritual ceremony of cleansing in the first sequence ‘The Passage’. The poet-celebrant then proceeds through a successive ritualistic motion in the ensuing sequences: ‘Initiations’, ‘Watermaid’, and ‘Lustra’. These are ‘stations of his cross’, unfurling challenges, trials, and transformative moments that ultimately culminate in a promise of a Christ-like resurrection, as also indicated in the title of the concluding sequence, ‘Newcomer’. Structurally, therefore, *Heavensgate* charts a journey of

---

<sup>17</sup> Morford and Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, pp. 360-361.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 361.

transition that is predicated upon ritual patterns that evoke the essence of the traditional rites of passage. In a universal context, as thoroughly described by the anthropologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep, rites of passage shape events that have the spirit of a new beginning, the weight of an ambiguous betwixt position, and the triumph of a transitioning end. The structural framework of rites of passage thus encompasses pre-liminal rites, marking separation; liminal rites, signifying transition; and post-liminal rites, symbolising incorporation.<sup>19</sup> As the name suggests, rites of separation create distance between celebrants' original status and their new one, as with the initiation of a child into adulthood. Symbolic acts are performed in this phase to signify the individual's detachment from their current state, such as requiring initiates to change their clothes or undergo cleansing and purification.<sup>20</sup> The second phase of the rites of passage is the transitional, liminal period during which the initiate has left one place or state but has not yet entered the next. This is an ambiguous zone, a middle phase, wherein individuals undergoing the ritual fully belong to neither their old status nor a new one.<sup>21</sup> They are, consequently, commonly viewed as both powerful and vulnerable, dangerous to others as well as in danger themselves.<sup>22</sup> In the conclusive rites of incorporation, initiates are admitted into the new status and, in this respect, can be regarded as new persons, assuming a new identity.<sup>23</sup> Rites that enact death in one condition and resurrection in another often take place during this final phase to mark the changes experienced by the individual.<sup>24</sup> Despite the overarching linear structure proposed by Gennep, these rites manifest in diverse forms across cultures, with variations in meaning, purpose, content, and outcome shaped by

---

<sup>19</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage* (1909), trans. *The Rites of Passage* by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

individual experiences and the cultural contexts in which they operate. I will come to a thorough analysis of how this tripartite structure unfolds in *Heavensgate* throughout my close readings.

Meanwhile, I want to emphasise that Okigbo's experience as a man of two belief systems is central to understanding the nature and outcome of his quest. His poems bear the unmistakable imprint of his personal experience. While existing analyses of the sequence acknowledge the intimate connection between the poet and his persona, much of the interpretive groundwork on his work remains incomplete, primarily due to unresolved discrepancies between the details of the poet's biography and his attempt to juxtapose local materials with colonial ones to suit the purpose of evolving a personal religion. I will revisit a wide range of previous readings of Okigbo, including those by Romanus Egudu, Abdul R. Yesufu, Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, Ihechukwu Madubuike, Curwen Best, and Obi Nwakanma. I categorise these readers based on their understanding of how Okigbo adapts Idoto to address his contemporary context. On the one hand, readers approaching Okigbo's work in binary terms often confront the question of whether his return to Idoto should be interpreted as an attempt to ward off the dominant colonial discourse. Conversely, considering his reliance on Christian language and liturgy within the text, some ponder whether his engagement with Western Christian culture undermines its African-ness. On the other hand, some readers rightly observe that Okigbo invests in a model of identity that is composed of the interaction between Igbo and Christian elements. However, guided by theoretical frameworks regarding the functionality of postcolonial texts as representative of ambivalent, double-toned voice, they tend to hear an agonised and struggling voice in the poet-protagonist, speculating that his endeavour to reconcile the Igbo and Christian realms is

fraught with elements of rivalry and confrontation, thereby concluding that *Heavensgate* presents an anguished, unsuccessful syncretism.

It is partly correct to argue that the poet-protagonist is struggling with the contradictions brought on by him approaching the local deity bearing the language and accoutrements of Catholicism. The poem depicts a journey of developing wholeness, which means that he can be consumed by uncertainty, indecisiveness, and conflict throughout the different stations of the journey, until he reaches a moment of resolution. Yet, concluding that the different Igbo and Christian spiritual and cultural influences did not ultimately integrate indicates a possible fallacy in the application of a biographical approach to the text, as it contradicts with Okigbo's clear remark that a fusion between European and African cultural influences was attainable within his poetry. This reading also misses the mass-like quality of *Heavensgate*, which suggests that the poet-protagonist will emerge from his ordeal a different being from what he was before. As this chapter will point out, some readers have focused on some parts of the poem more than others, not taking into account that each poem lends substantially to the understanding of the following one. Another group of readers, in a similar manner, have read the sequence as a long, convoluted narrative that consists of meaningless fragments. Others have filtered the details of this context-specific ritual in generic categories by favouring the application of a large, overarching structure that is deemed archetypal to capture the broader picture that emerges out of the sequence without appreciating the relationship between the structural formula and the individual and cultural experience conveyed in the poems.

This chapter recognises that the reworking of the local in Okigbo's poetry provides a challenge to any attempt to approach *Heavensgate* with a certain set of essentialists or even less limited postcolonial critical preconceptions, especially when acknowledging the

relevance of Okigbo's biographical details and the mass-like quality of the sequence.

Okigbo's life and personality, particularly his interviews, are valuable for further work on the poet. This is not to insist that poetry is a mirror of the author's beliefs and pre-established ideas. But by bridging the text and its context, the reader gets an opportunity to question not only the academic assumptions they might hold but also their moral and ethical ones as well. If we are to accept that the writer's postcolonial situation – that is, his biography – contributes to our understanding of the poems, claiming that Okigbo invested in a model of identity that does not originate from one single source would be consistent with his declaration of committing to a 'personal religion' that he evolved combining elements of both Igbo and Christian cultures. Still, a textual analysis is necessary to determine whether what we are presented with in the text is in line with this claim. If a close reading of the text offers no elaborations, corrections and re-evaluations in line with the ideology and taste of Okigbo, then we ought to resolve the contradiction between our acknowledgment of the usefulness of a biographical approach to read a text that presents the Igbo and the Christian as incompatible spheres and Okigbo's personal views about evolving an inclusive religion whereby poetry becomes a site of worship. Is this approach to biographical reading valid? Is it that poetry is a place where ideas are developed and enacted, where the tension between spiritual and postcolonial identities are brought into productive tension? Or is it that Okigbo was trying to look sort of an idealist in interviews, painting a rose-tinted picture of colonialism in theory/interviews, but not in practice/poetry, where the different influences did not integrate effortlessly?

Okigbo's quest in *Heavensgate* details his transition from formal modes of worship, both Igbo and Christian, towards a personalised religion centred on poetry as a form of worship in its own right. With this point established, I now turn to situate this quest in the unique context

through which Okigbo apprehend a spiritually conflicting world emotionally and intellectually – the world of Igbo belief system: their conceptualisation of the cosmos and how they reason their material and spiritual existence. I then offer a brief historical account of colonialism in Igboland, highlighting specific instances of how it interfered in this intricate cosmological context upon its arrival in the mid-nineteenth century. I follow with a discussion of the particular sources of Okigbo's postcoloniality, his Catholicism and colonial education on the one hand, and his strong ancestral ties on the other, and Okigbo's response to this situation: how he viewed himself and wanted to be viewed amid these conditions. I then evaluate the critical writing on the spiritual aspect of Okigbo's poetry and the main limitations, in order to foreground my reading of a potential alternative postcolonial response to *Heavensgate* – one that suggests that the poet-celebrant successfully emerges as a new figure of a poet. I finally turn to *Heavensgate*, paying close attention to its literary qualities and highlighting the stages through which the poet-protagonist charts his way towards becoming a 'Newcomer'. I recognise there may be limits to an outsider's reading of these rituals, which are context-specific, not to mention, personal. However, in pursuing a close reading, my analysis seeks to trace the complex process that preoccupies Okigbo's celebrant as he embarks on his quest.

### **Missionary disruption of Igbo cosmic harmony**

#### Igbo cosmology: duality and adaptability

The cosmological worldview of the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria is principally structured around the notion of balance and complementary duality, which manifests itself in the law of equal opposites – visible and invisible, physical and spiritual, masculine and feminine. This interconnectedness reflects the unified perspective the Igbo held regarding the universe,

encompassing its components, structure, and the diverse forces operating within it. Central to this perspective is the concept of balance between masculine and feminine principles, especially in the context of deities, where the compatibility of sexually different entities is essential for the myth of regeneration.<sup>25</sup> Joseph Therese Agbasiere's rich anthropological account of Igbo cosmological principles observes this duality, noting that this concept applies to the two main divinities in the Igbo pantheon: Chukwu is conceptualised as male, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient; he is the 'author of the physical universe', and the creator of all other divinities that make up the Igbo pantheon.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Ala is the female force who complements Chukwu; she is the preserver of his creation and upholds the laws that he gives.<sup>27</sup> She is also revered as 'the cosmic base on which the vault of the heavens/sky rests'.<sup>28</sup> Idoto is a manifestation of Ala. She is venerated by generations of Ojoto residents, who, like many riverine communities among the Igbo, revere the river as the spirit of all life.<sup>29</sup> Her twin-consort, 'Ukpaka-Oto' represents 'the male archetype and the alter ego to the feminine'.<sup>30</sup> The Igbo conceive of this male-female compatibility spatially: they view the earthly realm, including water, as predominantly inhabited by female spirits, whereas the sky is conceptualised as the palace of Chukwu, who is believed to reside there alongside 'a host of powerful divinities and primordial entities like *Anyanwu* (the Sun god), *Amadioha* (the god of thunder), and *Igwe* (the sky god)'.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Okigbo referenced this myth in an interview in which he explained the symbolism of the python and the tortoise, totems for worship of Idoto and her male archetype and alter ego, Ukpaka-Oto, pointing out that these symbols represented 'the penis' and 'the female clitoris'. (Marjory Whitelaw, 1965, p. 12).

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Therese Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 50-51; see also Chibueze C Udeani, *Inculuration as Dialogue: Igbo Culture and the Message of Christ* (Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2007), p. 53.

<sup>27</sup> Agbasiere, p. 52; Udeani, p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> Agbasiere, p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> Obi Nwakanma, *Christopher Okigbo 1930-67: Thirsting for Sunlight* (Boydell and Brewer, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*

<sup>31</sup> Chinwe M. A. Nwoye, 'Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview: An Insider's Perspective', *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 3:9 (2011), p. 309, <<https://dokumen.tips/documents/igbo-cultural-and-religious-worldview-in-nigeria-the-hausa-and-the-yoruba.html?page=1>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

In the wider Igbo pantheon, Chukwu is held to be morally involved in the activities taking place in the physical universe.<sup>32</sup> Yet, as his transcendence distances him from direct contact with human beings, his displeasure, anger, blessings, and miracles are invariably exhibited through powerful forces of the sky, taking the form of natural phenomena such as thunder and lightning.<sup>33</sup> The interaction between Chukwu and the Igbo is also mediated through other countless intercessors, including natural entities such as mountains, seas, and rivers, which are revered as the spirits through which Chukwu manifests and speaks; these entities carry his messages and blessings, convey his wrath or punishment to the people as well as take their pleas and sacrifices to him.<sup>34</sup> Ala is at the apex of these natural deities, a mother figure embodying ‘the womb that holds, nurtures, and renews’.<sup>35</sup> She is the generator of life and the primary source of fertility and sustenance. Consequently, the Igbo hold ritual ceremonies to appease Ala before planting and harvesting, seeking her favour for the growth of healthy crops and expressing gratitude for the forthcoming abundant harvest. Major rites of passage, such as birth and death, are also performed in honour of Ala, and as the recognised moral authority among the Igbo, she is credited with establishing the mores known as ‘omenala (statutes of Ala)’ which provide guidelines for behaviour to ensure peace, social harmony, and the protection of both collective and individual interests.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, since the earth offers settlement and nourishment to the sedentary agricultural Igbo and serves as the vital burial space for the deceased, Ala acts as an enforcer of the law that Chukwu gives.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, any death resulting from the powerful forces of the sky is considered a ‘bad death’, and such

---

<sup>32</sup> Agbasiere, p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> N. J. Gbule and C. S. Nwaka, ‘The Persistence of Igbo Worldview in the Sabbath Church Healing Liturgy and Praxis’, *Mission Studies*, 38:2 (2021), p. 241, doi:10.1163/15733831-12341792.

<sup>36</sup> Agbaseire, *Women in Igbo Life*, p. 53.

<sup>37</sup> Agbaseire, p. 53.

occurrences are viewed as abominations by Ala, sanctioned through the denial of proper burial rites.<sup>38</sup> This is a communal recognition of cosmic balance, signifying the cooperation between the masculine and feminine principles. So, just as the sky and earth collaborate to bring forth crops, any disturbance of the natural, social, and ethical balance is met with drought, famine, and disease.

Threats to cosmic harmony arise when abominable acts, resulting from human offenses, go unexpiated. Violations such as stealing, murder, and incest, are considered ‘abominations, which must be adequately propitiated’.<sup>39</sup> Individually and collectively, thus, the Igbo show gratitude to their deities through libations, which involve sprinkling palm wine, water, white chalk, the blood of sacrificed animals, kola nuts, and food on the ground.<sup>40</sup> During these rituals, they recite prayers, wishes, and confessions to invoke the deities’ goodwill and forgiveness before partaking of food and drink at gatherings.<sup>41</sup> In Igbo culture, sacrifices are not mere tokens; they are carefully chosen to ensure their acceptability. We will encounter examples of these deliberate offerings in Okigbo’s poems. Sacrifices encompass animate and inanimate objects, such as ‘*Nwasisi Okuko* (chicken), or *Akwa* (eggs) and *Nkpuru Oji* (kola nuts)’, and ‘*Eghu* (goats), *Mmai* (palm wine) and *Nsu* (chalk)’.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, each sacrificial agent has its symbolic significance. For instance, kola nuts primarily symbolize hospitality, while chicks represent innocence.<sup>43</sup> In propitiatory or cleansing rituals, the sacrificial object is regarded as an ‘ambassador’, ‘sent with petitions and gifts to the divinity in order to present

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Onwumere A. Ikwuagwu, *Initiation in African Traditional Religion: A Systematic Symbolic Analysis, with Special Reference to Aspects of Igbo Religion in Nigeria* (Würzburg, 2007), p. 21, <<https://d-nb.info/982179243/34>> {accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

favourably the case of the sick person or the community for whom the sacrifice is being offered'.<sup>44</sup>

In the Igbo cosmological worldview, a crucial focus lies in navigating and maintaining a balanced relationship with deities, as the preservation and advancement of both the individual and community hinge upon maintaining equilibrium in the cosmos. This interplay, in a way, accounts for 'the constant 'religious romance' between the Igbo and supernatural forces', wherein individuals actively seek the blessings of benevolent forces and ancestors, the living dead, through offerings and sacrifices.<sup>45</sup> However, in this 'religious romance', Chinua Achebe reveals that 'gods are functional'; if 'a god ceases to perform its functions', it is quickly supplanted by a new one.<sup>46</sup> This expansive nature of the Igbo pantheon perhaps explains why Igboland is said to be 'the home of divinities', where we have variations from a very crowded pantheon, a thinly populated one, to 'a situation where they appear to be scarcely in existence'.<sup>47</sup> While the existence of crowded pantheons suggests the perpetual quest of the Igbo for new potent spiritual agencies, it also underscores their adaptable and evolving worldview. This fluidity presents opportunities for a synergistic convergence between the Igbo cosmology and other belief systems, hinting at the prospect of an integration with the forthcoming Christianity. This is the vision I argue that Okigbo encapsulates in *Heavensgate*.

---

<sup>44</sup> Sabinus Okechukwu Iweadighi, "Sickness and the Search for Healing in Igboland", 2011, p. 64, <<https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:163025850>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>45</sup> N. J. Gbule and C. S. Nwaka, 'The Persistence of Igbo Worldview', p. 242.

<sup>46</sup> cited in N. J. Gbule and C. S. Nwaka, 'The Persistence of Igbo Worldview', p. 243.

<sup>47</sup> Udeani, p. 53.

### The missionary presence in Igboland

Early European missionaries entered into this dynamic cosmological framework in the mid-nineteenth century. Describing this first contact, George Basden notes that the European missionaries ‘found it difficult to fathom the native mind’; they were ‘generally ignorant of the native’s mode of thinking’ and seldom possessed the essential spiritual element to comprehend ancient native law and custom.<sup>48</sup> Missionaries could not understand Africa per se. As a result, they judged Igbo religiosity according to Western theological standards, mislabelling its followers ‘heathens, drunkards, robbers, murderers, and cannibals’ or ‘for the most part degraded savages, worshippers of devils, and participants in horrible fetiche rites’ living in a ‘mass of dark humanity’.<sup>49</sup> Missionaries, therefore, ‘intended, consciously or unconsciously, to destroy what was given in the African cultural world so as to implant that which is considered, in their view, human, civilised, worthy, and valuable’.<sup>50</sup> This dismantling process extended to the treatment of Igbo divinities, specifically Chukwu and Ala. Missionaries targeted these deities because their interconnected role as male and female principles conflicted with monotheistic Christian precepts.<sup>51</sup> Missionaries also disapproved of Igbo initiation ceremonies, pageants, and masquerades, overlooking the fact that these practices were foundational elements of Igbo religious and social life, as well as important sources of entertainment.<sup>52</sup>

Early Christian missionaries achieved limited success, with their efforts primarily confined to the Niger and its tributaries.<sup>53</sup> However, with the advent of British colonialism in the early

---

<sup>48</sup> George T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Southern Nigeria* (London: Frank Cass, 1966), p. xiv.

<sup>49</sup> Max Siollun, *What Britain Did to Nigeria: A Short History of Conquest and Rule* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2021), p. 253; see also Udeani, p. 82.

<sup>50</sup> Udeani, p. 91.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Allo Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 165.

1900s, these missionaries intensified their efforts, motivated by an implicit cultural imperialism that sought to connect Western colonial culture with Christianity. Many missionaries perceived the Western colonial Christian culture as superior and civilised, and thus attempted to implant it into what they deemed primitive and uncivilised culture. They aligned with the reigning view of the British coloniser, which was marked by an expansionist agenda. In this sense, ‘the common denominator’ between the two forces, political and religious alike, ‘was expansionism’.<sup>54</sup> The Church became an instrument for European expansion, operating under the principle of “Be converted or be destroyed”.<sup>55</sup> This conversion process required the rejection of native beliefs and customs in favour of the missionaries’ culture and language, resulting in a confrontation that led to ‘the devaluation, and almost annihilation, of a non-European culture’.<sup>56</sup> While positive changes in areas such as education and social reform occurred – exemplified by the missionaries’ role in abolishing practices like twin infanticide and human sacrifice – scholars generally agree that their forceful remoulding of social practices resulted in a radical transformation of the political and cultural systems of indigenous communities.<sup>57</sup> This transformation posed a significant threat to the preservation of much of pre-colonial Nigerian culture, particularly that of the Igbo.

The endeavour of missionaries transcended religion as they established schools that served a dual purpose: functioning as educational institutions and acting as a pathway to Christianity. Initially, the impact of mission education was limited, as locals approached it with caution due to the Christian values it imparted, which often conflicted with indigenous customs. However, this cautious attitude gradually shifted towards a broader acceptance of certain

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Udeani, p. 86.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>57</sup> It is worth noting that Nigerian postcolonial writers have critically examined the consequences of these seemingly beneficial changes, as seen in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (regarding twins) and Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (concerning suicide).

aspects, particularly reading and writing. The primary reason for this change in attitude was that mission education prepared individuals for entry into such lucrative positions as ‘colonial interpreters, catechists, messengers, teachers, and clerks’.<sup>58</sup> Conversion to Christianity and formal education enabled Nigerians to engage more closely with British colonisers. However, since the culture introduced by the missionaries and the content of their education were perceived as too foreign, schools ‘acted as factories for the production of British clones’.<sup>59</sup> Missionaries viewed the moral improvement of the natives as integral to their mission, with many believing that their pupils would revert to undesirable habits if allowed to return to their communities each day; as a result, students were isolated from their communities, residing in boarding schools where they could be supervised continuously.<sup>60</sup>

For schoolteachers, civilising Nigerian students involved a deliberate campaign to instil European behaviour and culture. The curriculum closely mirrored that of British schools, with students learning about English kings and queens rather than their own heritage, reading and writing in English, Greek, and Latin, and studying Shakespeare.<sup>61</sup> As Elizabeth Isichei notes, this educational approach produced a class of individuals more familiar with British traditions than their own, creating a rift between them and their indigenous cultural influences.<sup>62</sup> The clash between traditional and foreign British culture often left students suspended ‘between two worlds’, compelled to choose between abandoning one for the other or forging a ‘personal synthesis’.<sup>63</sup> As we will see in the case of Okigbo, these mission-educated subjects found themselves at the forefront of transformative forces.

---

<sup>58</sup> Siollun, p. 268.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People*, p. 191.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

## Okigbo's synthesis of ancestral and Christian elements

### The sources of Okigbo's postcoloniality

Christopher Okigbo witnessed the zenith of the European 'civilising mission'. In the words of his biographer, Obi Nwakanma, 'Okigbo was born straight into a world of imperial domination'.<sup>64</sup> During the 1930s and 1940s, Christian missionaries, primarily through their influence in schools, gained significant ground across Igboland as 'people began to sense the advantages of subscribing to the new western ethos in a world in rapid transition'.<sup>65</sup> The traditional Igbo way of life waned as a new cultural paradigm ascended, ushering in values that transformed the traditional society and shifted allegiances from the indigenous deities to the Christian God. The missionary imprint on this region of West Africa is evident in Okigbo's Catholicism. As detailed by Nwakanma, Okigbo grew up under the strict religious influence of his Roman Catholic parents, who imposed a rigid faith structure on their children.<sup>66</sup> His exposure to Catholicism was further reinforced by accompanying his father, a Catholic primary school teacher, to various mission schools.<sup>67</sup> This active engagement with Catholicism shaped Okigbo's spiritual and social identity, culminating in his leadership role within the Church community in Onitsha.<sup>68</sup> Okigbo's participation in religious activities stemmed not only from a deep faith in the Church but also from an attraction towards the glamour and theatricality of Catholic rituals. According to his brother Pius Okigbo, Christopher's upbringing was marked by a deep fascination with the solemnity of Mass, the mystery of the Eucharist, the Corpus Christi procession, the Stations of the Cross, and the

---

<sup>64</sup> Obi Nwakanma, *Thirsting for Sunlight*, p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

novena rituals.<sup>69</sup> These ceremonial performances fuelled the imagination of the poet, later finding expression in his poetry. Furthermore, as the son of a schoolteacher, Okigbo led a somewhat isolated life, as schoolmasters like Mr. Okigbo resided with their families in the tranquil seclusion of mission school compounds, separate from host communities; Christian students were prohibited from participating in traditional rituals or eating with ‘their “pagan” neighbours’, lest they be fed with ‘unclean food’.<sup>70</sup> Okigbo’s father practiced Catholicism with a fervour typical of new converts, yet he still maintained ties with his local community. Nwakanma recounts that during holidays and festive seasons, the headmaster’s children regularly visited Ojoto, Christopher’s birthplace, where traditional Igbo spirituality continued to thrive.<sup>71</sup> Despite the widespread influence of Christianity, which brought significant cultural change to the Igbo world in the 1930s and early 1940s, the mystical presence of the river deity, Idoto, was still felt in Ojoto, and her worship and intricate rituals remained to some extent intact. There, the shrine of mother Idoto, known as the Ajani shrine, nestled amidst groves leading to the river, adorned with oilbean trees along the undulating waterfront. In this shrine, offerings and sacrifices were, and still are, regularly made, and major decisions are taken, and given a ritual binding force, underscoring the profound spiritual connection between the community and the sacred river deity.<sup>72</sup>

During Okigbo’s visits to his birthplace, his maternal grandmother and uncle Nweze, who remained unconverted to Christianity, introduced him to Idoto and brought to life the goddess’s enchanting lore and captivating stories by sharing tales of his maternal grandfather, Ikejiofor, the former priest of the Ajani shrine, and highlighting Christopher’s unique place in

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

the shrine.<sup>73</sup> Okigbo was born with a remarkable physical resemblance to his maternal grandfather, which convinced everybody that he was Ikejiofor returned. Thus, he was regarded as the rightful successor to the traditional priestly functions of the Ajani shrine after the grandfather died. With the advent of Christian missions, Igbo Christian converts were instructed against such metaphysical views of existence, which were cast as superstitious, idolatrous, and pagan. Nonetheless, the Igbo, even among Okigbo's generation, were aware of their own cosmology, particularly the notion that deceased relatives may come back into another life on earth through a cycle of rebirth. It is important here to note that the process '*inyo uwa* (returning to the world)' does not refer to the simple reincarnation or animation of the dead, as Christian missionaries were inclined to misunderstand it.<sup>74</sup> Rather, it signifies a reunion of the deceased's vital life force and indestructible soul with Chukwu after death who retains it until it later returns.<sup>75</sup> This individuated sign is called by Igbo '*agu*', and when it returns, aspects of the deceased's personality and physical characteristics are reborn in the descendants.<sup>76</sup> In the traditional Igbo worldview, thus, '*inyo uwa*', encompasses a philosophical, social, and spiritual framework that transcends mere rebirth and return, for while people point at physical characteristics such as gestures, character traits, looks, and other physical signs are sought to confirm that the child really is a reincarnation of an ancestor, aspects of his personality come into play in the formation of the child's identity.

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>74</sup> E. Elochukwu Uzukwu, 'Igbo World and Ultimate Reality and Meaning', *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 5:3 (1982), p. 196, [doi:10.3138/uram.5.3.188](https://doi.org/10.3138/uram.5.3.188).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

### Okigbo's postcolonial response as 'personal religion'

Okigbo was categorical in his commitment to a broad, inclusive religious sensibility, which culminated in a form of a personal religion that combined both Igbo and Christian elements. His critical attitude towards the dominant presence of the Catholic Church and its proselytising mission in Africa in his life and poetry has often obscured his effort to retain a connection to both religions. Nwakanma suggests that, despite being sentimentally Catholic throughout his life, Okigbo became sceptical of the Church, believing that its clergy often acted arbitrarily and outside the principles of 'Christian charity' in their control over African adherents.<sup>77</sup> Nwakanma recounts how 'infuriated' Okigbo responded by planning with his friends to dramatize and expose incidents that were, in his opinion, reflective of the hypocrisy and hollow morality of the Church.<sup>78</sup> In poetry too, Okigbo was sometimes strident in his criticism of missionaries. A frequently cited example occurs in 'Fragments Out of the Deluge', where Okigbo iconises the famous missionary priest of Onitsha, Father Flanagan, as a figure of religious propaganda:

Past the village orchard where

Flannagan

Preached the Pope's message,

To where drowning nuns suspired,

Asking the key-word from stone;

& he said:

---

<sup>77</sup> Nwakanma, p. 102.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

*To sow the fireseed among grasses,*

*& lo, to keep it till it burns out ... (30)*

Okigbo also famously likened the missionaries' presence in Africa to predatory birds preparing for an onslaught, underscoring the aggressive nature of colonisation, where missionaries act as agents of cultural and spiritual subjugation.

Their talons they drew out of their scabbard,

Upon the tree trunks, as if on fire-clay,

Their beaks they sharpened;

And spread like eagles their felt-wings (33).

Still, Okigbo's acknowledgment of the sometimes-fraught reality of missionary presence on the continent does not necessarily mean that he rejected Christianity altogether. Rather, his critical attitude reflects a nuanced understanding of the historical and cultural dynamics at play, recognising Christianity's presence within Africa while remaining keenly aware of the challenges and complexities posed by missionary activities.

In fact, Okigbo saw Christianity, the externally introduced faith system, as having become a component of African culture and identity, condemning what he describes as 'nonsense talk we hear nowadays of men of two worlds'.<sup>79</sup> This is a rejection of the idea that individuals must choose between their African heritage and the influences of Western culture, represented here by Christianity. For Okigbo, it appears, such dichotomous thinking, which insists on the notion of being torn between two worlds, is a simplification of the African experience. In Okigbo's viewpoint, embracing multiple identities and perspectives does not compromise the

---

<sup>79</sup> Okigbo, Interview with Serumaga, p. 248.

authenticity of African-ness, for the fluid and dynamic nature of African identity could accommodate a wide range of influences and experiences.

I belong, integrally, to my own society just as, I believe, I belong also integrally to some societies other than my own. The truth, of course, is that the modern African is no longer a product of an entirely indigenous culture. The modern sensibility which the modern African poet is trying to express, is by its very nature complex, and it is a complex of values, some of which are indigenous, some of which are exotic, some of which are traditional, some of which are modern. Some are Christian, some are non-Christian, and I think that anybody who thinks it is possible to express consistently only one line of values ... is probably being artificial.<sup>80</sup>

Here, Okigbo seems convinced that even had there been no colonisation, the precolonial African culture would have changed by other forms of cross-cultural contacts, for, as he notes in his interview with Marjory Whitelaw, there is no ‘culture in the world that does not have borrowed elements’.<sup>81</sup> Okigbo’s conception of modern African sensibility rejects the reductionist idea of a pure cultural experience, instead embracing a pluralistic understanding of identity that is informed by an interplay of both indigenous and foreign influences. Africans gave, borrowed, adopted, reinvented, and incorporated European and other cultures into their own. This sense of mutual interculturalism stems from Okigbo’s view of the African postcolonial context as inevitably modern, and of himself as a modern poet. Partly for this

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Okigbo, Interview with Majority Whitelaw, p. 33.

reason, Michael Echeruo argues that Okigbo sought to publish in the US-based *Poetry* magazine.

Okigbo was staking out for himself a place of recognition among the great Anglo-American modernists. Okigbo wanted to step out beyond the elitist but limited world of *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* to the elitist (and esteemed) circle of new, even experimental poets.<sup>82</sup>

Okigbo certainly had this sense of going beyond local elitist but limited outlets. However, this by no means equates to a desire to undermine his location or affiliations for classification within a global network. Nor does it suggest what Maik Nwosu describes as Afro-Marxist reductionism, which might criticise Okigbo as lacking in spiritual and political awareness “to see any contradiction between a western-oriented consciousness and an Africa-centred consciousness”.<sup>83</sup> Rather, Okigbo viewed concepts of cultural binarism, purity, and closure as overly restrictive, since African individuals were not solely products of a pure indigenous culture. He recognised African value systems as the result of a fusion of indigenous practices and borrowings from non-African and inter-African communities, shaped by centuries of cultural exchange. He, therefore, cautioned against the notion of adhering strictly to a single set of values, arguing that poetry that seeks to recuperate a national image by emphasising a pristine native culture and eliminating foreign influences tends to be ‘artificial’. Okigbo’s perspective conveys the idiom of this thesis, as it recognises the potential for the local to

---

<sup>82</sup> Michael J.C. Echeruo, ‘Christopher Okigbo, *Poetry* Magazine, and the ‘Lament of the Silent Sisters’’, *Research in African Literatures* 35.3: (2004), p.10, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3821291>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>83</sup> Maik Nwosu, ‘Christopher Okigbo and the Postcolonial Market of Memories’, *Research in African Literatures*, 38:4, (2007), p.73, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20109539>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

evolve and connect with other cultural networks. By reworking the local materials he inherited from his ancestors, Okigbo does not come across as a passive recipient in this space of cultural exchange. He does not emerge as moulded by a colonial master, but an active participant originating a private local religion that draws from both local Igbo spirituality and colonial Christian religion.

By virtue of modern conditions, Okigbo stood against the implication that such binary perspectives also applied to poetry. Graduating from the University of Ibadan with a BA in Classics, Okigbo was, on the one hand, influenced by ‘various literatures and cultures, right from Classical times to the present day, in English, Latin, Greek and a little French, a little Spanish’.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, as Donatus Nwoga notes, Okigbo was positively influenced by local festival music and masquerade poetry.<sup>85</sup> Okigbo often indicated that he has no reservations about borrowing from other works, or even emulating or echoing them. Yet, ‘the question of influence’, according to him, was ‘a very complicated’ one; ‘one reads something and says, this might have been influenced by one person. It’s often difficult to pin down an influence to a particular source’.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, while he occasionally explicitly acknowledged his sources, as seen in his *Silences*, where he referenced his inspiration from Gerard Manley Hopkins, Debussy, Herman Melville, Malcolm Cowley, Raja Ratnam, Stéphane Mallarmé, Rabindranath Tagore, García Lorca, he often left his influences unattributed.<sup>87</sup> In one instance, responding to a questionnaire by *Transition*, he candidly remarked, “it is surprising

---

<sup>84</sup> Okigbo, in Robert Serumaga, ‘Interviewing Christopher Okigbo’, p. 249.

<sup>85</sup> Nwoga, Donatus Ibe. ‘Christopher Okigbo: The Man and the Poet’ in *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*, ed. Donatus Ibe Nwoga. (Washington, DC: Three Continents, 1984), p. 28.

<sup>86</sup> Okigbo, in Robert Serumaga, ‘Interviewing Christopher Okigbo’, p. 249.

<sup>87</sup> Okigbo, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*, p. xii.

how many lines of my *Limits* I am not sure are mine and yet do not know whose lines they were originally. But does it matter?"<sup>88</sup>

What mattered to Okigbo, it appears, is extending the scope of his cultural and poetic landscape and integrating what he borrows in the idiom of his poetry. In fact, he developed a metaphor of the self as a coral extending its roots in various directions to convey his cultural and poetic resilience. In his introductory remarks, Okigbo described the nature of his quest for spiritual and artistic fulfilment in *Heavensgate*, and by extension in *Labyrinth*, as a narrative 'of the root extending its branches of coral, of corals extending their roots into each living hour'.<sup>89</sup> Just as a coral grows and expands by forming intricate networks of interconnected structures, Okigbo's spiritual and poetic identity grows by embracing and assimilating elements from various influences into his artistic expression; he evolves with each new encounter and experience, each living hour, avoiding stalemates and stagnation. While the botanic metaphorical discourse of roots may carry connotations of nativism and fixed identity, Okigbo puts forward the image of a living coral reef, evoking notions of vitality, extension, and interconnectedness. The image of the growing root reappears in 'Siren Limits II', where he portrays himself as

a shrub among the poplars

Needing more roots

More sap to grow to sunlight,

Thirsting for sunlight.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> Christopher Okigbo, Response to *Transition* Conference Questionnaire 2.5 (1962), pp. 11-12 cited in Maik Nwosu, 'Christopher Okigbo and the Postcolonial Market of Memories', *Research in African Literatures*, 38:4, (2007), 70-86, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20109539>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

<sup>89</sup> Okigbo, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*, p. xiv.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

Here, Okigbo seems to have a sense of being overshadowed among taller and more dominant poplars or influences. Nevertheless, driven by a desire to grow more roots and connections, he incorporates borrowed elements into his poetry, recasting them in a uniquely personal idiom. For instance, Jahan Ramazani argues that Okigbo integrates traditional African praise song imagery with symbols from European, specifically Yeatsian, poetry.<sup>91</sup> He notes that Okigbo ‘reterritorializes Yeats, africanizing him as an elephant hunter’ and transforming ‘his masks as ritual objects, while deterritorializing the praise song, centering it on a European subject’.<sup>92</sup> Okigbo’s blending of such wide-ranging sources was often lauded as a literary virtue by Sunday Anozie, who argued that Okigbo’s genius lay not only in what he used, but what he saw in it, and how he transmuted it. What should count, according to Anozie, is the ‘total poetic compound, its functional effectiveness vis-à-vis the particular emotion it expresses, rather than the isolated borrowed elements’.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, J. P. Clark, credited Okigbo with ‘a rare gift of literary imagination’ that ‘seizes upon what attracts it and distils therefrom, without destroying the original, a fresh artifact’, despite detecting in the ‘Watermaid’ section of *Heavensgate* ‘an apparatus completely taken from Pound’s Cantos 6 and 104’.<sup>94</sup> Okigbo’s postcolonial stance aimed neither at excluding the Euro-Christian influences he acquired through colonialism nor preserving the Igbo cosmological worldview in its original inherited form. Instead, his acknowledgment of the colonial component as part of the multifaceted nature of modern African culture necessitated the integration of imported elements within an African context. Importantly, this effort to expand boundaries does not signify a repudiation of African culture; on the contrary, Okigbo aimed to craft a unique

---

<sup>91</sup> Jahan Ramazani, ‘Modernist Bricolage, Postcolonial Hybridity’, in *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 102.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>93</sup> Sunday Anozie, *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric* (London: Evans Bros, 1972), p. 97.

<sup>94</sup> John Pepper Clark, ‘Poetry in Africa Today’, *Transition*, 18 (1965), p. 25.

spiritual and literary framework deeply rooted in his local soil but reworked to suit his personal purposes.

Whether readers of *Heavensgate* perceive it as African, English, a blend, or something else is of no interest to Okigbo.

A poet writes poetry and once the work is published it becomes a public property. It's left to whoever reads it to decide whether It's African poetry or English. There isn't any such thing as a poet trying to express African-ness. [...] A poet expresses himself.<sup>95</sup>

Although the poet-celebrant's journey in *Heavensgate* is deeply personal, Okigbo's earlier mentioned reflection on the evolution of his poem from an Easter sequence to a mass suggests a deliberate effort to invite readers to perceive a collective – perhaps national – dimension to the poem. Okigbo clarified this intention in his interview with Van Sertima, noting that although the poem is personal in the sense that it springs from an exploration of a private arena of experience, 'it is capable, of course, of interpretations at various levels'.<sup>96</sup> One of these levels is national, where 'some people are told' that the poem is about a 'quest for self-fulfilment by a nation, that the hero might not, in fact, be just a personage, no, might be Africa'.<sup>97</sup> This does not mean that the poet sought to dictate the poem's meaning or diminish its significance as a personal expression. Rather, Okigbo wanted to open up avenues where the poem's relevance could resonate with individual, collective, and even universal

---

<sup>95</sup> Okigbo, Interview with Marjory Whitelaw, p. 28.

<sup>96</sup> Chukwuma Azuonye, 'Christopher Okigbo's Intentions: A Critical Edition of a Previously Unpublished Interview by Ivan van Sertima', *Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series* (2011), p. 11, <[https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana\\_faculty\\_pubs/6](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs/6)> [accessed 4 March 2024].

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

experiences.<sup>98</sup> As Okigbo himself contends, he conceived of his work ‘first at a personal level, and whatever other interpretation it is capable of having – that doesn’t concern me’; ‘having given birth to it, I am no longer preoccupied with it. It must now possess its own independence – its own individual life’.<sup>99</sup>

Okigbo may not have conveyed ‘African-ness’ in his poetry in the way the term might be commonly understood, but the Igbo worldview that has informed his poetic voice and perspective is distinctively African, albeit reworked to suit his personal purposes. After all, Okigbo adopted a form of poetry that is concerned with the inward exploration of the self, writing that ‘expresses’, that ‘brings out a sense of inner disturbances’.<sup>100</sup> The self, as he explained, means

my various selves, because the self itself is made up of various elements which do not always combine happily. And when I talk of looking inward to myself, I mean turning inward to examine myselfs. This of course takes account of ancestors ...Because I do not exist apart from my ancestors.<sup>101</sup>

Okigbo’s poetry presents self, ancestors, and community as interdependent elements. His rejection of limiting binary perspectives does not preclude his committed engagement with the postcolonial Nigerian society, for, as he convincingly remarks, ‘any inward exploration involves the interaction of the subject with other people, and I believe that a writer who sets

---

<sup>98</sup> In the interview, Van Sertima rightly gathers that Okigbo does not mean to create a hero who is specifically representative of Africa, but a ‘figure that throws many shadows’, opening the quest out ‘into – may we use the word, though it may sound cliché – universal significance’. Okigbo concurs, contending that ‘the richness of the work of art depends on the depth of the interpretation – depends on the depth of the treatment – or rather, the depth of the execution’. Chukwuma Azuonye, ‘Christopher Okigbo’s Intentions’, p. 12.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Okigbo, Interview with Marjory Whitelaw, p. 35.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

out to discover himself, by so doing will also discover his society'.<sup>102</sup> In this sense, Okigbo's reworking of Idoto spirituality to become a personal religion does not make his ancestral belief system any less culturally-specific. Rather, it creates a new local material – one that fosters a dialogue between the past and the present, the ancestral and the contemporary, as well as the local and non-local.

### **Critical response: interpreting *Heavensgate*'s return to Idoto**

Okigbo's interviews make clear that he was not interested in reclaiming a pure, indigenous spiritual identity untouched by the colonial encounter. Critical studies interested in the spiritual dimension within Okigbo's poetry, particularly in *Heavensgate*, frequently draw upon insights from the poet's personal experiences to unpack his poems. Dan Izevbaye remarks that Okigbo's depersonalisation of his protagonist, embrace of modernist mythical techniques and symbolism turn the quest poem into 'an independent literary drama' that evades a 'specific biographical meaning'.<sup>103</sup> Still, this biographically approach remains useful for interpreting *Heavensgate*, given its rootedness in Okigbo's priestly legacy. While many of Okigbo's readers make use of his biography in their analysis, they often contend that his poetry embodies a yearning to be liberated from the burden of a colonial past. Romanus Egudu, for instance, draws parallels between the protagonist's sense of guilt in the introit and Okigbo the priest. According to Egudu, Okigbo, after a foray into Christianity, returns to mother Idoto as a prodigal longing to reunite with her, arguing that this sense of guilt stems from Okigbo's belief that he 'cannot be accommodated in the Christian religious experience where he feels exiled', and therefore 'goes back to the indigenous religion to revive it and

---

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>103</sup> Dan Izevbaye, 'Living the myth: revisiting Okigbo's art and commitment', *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde*, vol. 48:1 (2011), p. 17, doi:10.4314/tvl.v48i1.63817.

retain it'.<sup>104</sup> Consequently, Egudu suggests that the dominant experience of *Heavensgate* is one of homecoming, 'a retreat from Christ to Idoto'.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, Abdul R. Yesufu builds upon the connection between Okigbo's personal experience as a priest to Idoto and the poet-protagonist's appeal to her, interpreting the poem as a journey culminating in his 'monumental reintegration' into the cultural context that initially nurtured him.<sup>106</sup> While Yesufu provides a more detailed textual analysis than Egudu, he, like the latter, fails to fully capture the essence of the poem, overlooking the poet's deliberate incorporation of Christian references. Both readers conclude that the text depicts a triumphant return to Idoto, prompting the question of how to justify their adoption of a biographical approach in light of Okigbo's explicit declaration that he never abandoned one religion to embrace the other. Even when reading the text beyond its parallels with Okigbo's priestly role, the question persists: what about Okigbo's textual reworking to juxtapose local references with Christian allusions?

In their biographical analysis of *Heavensgate*, Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike keenly observe and critique the influence of Catholic liturgy and terminology within the poem, arguing that its overshadowing presence makes it challenging to perceive the poem as a genuine return to native culture. According to them, 'if Okigbo had had the humility of a votary and wanted to learn how to properly invoke a divine or ancestral spirit, he could have listened to village elders or priests' instead of invoking her in supposed reverence using the language and spirit of a foreign religion.<sup>107</sup> The poem, in their evaluation, emerges as a dressed-up Christian ritual; 'the whole framework of the poem is Christian and

---

<sup>104</sup> Romanus N. Egudu, 'Defence of culture in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo', *African Literature Today* (1973), p. 19.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Abdul R. Yesufu, 'Ritual and the Quest for Selfhood in Okigbo's *Labyrinths* and Brathwaite's *Masks*', *Neohelicon*, 28 (2011), p. 242, doi:10.1023/A:1011921726365.

<sup>107</sup> Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jamie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980), p. 191.

Catholic, with snippets of traditional African ritual thrown in'.<sup>108</sup> Consequently, they assert that the invocation of Idoto is 'patently insincere'.<sup>109</sup> Chinweizu and his peers further refuse to consider Okigbo's way of approaching Idoto with Christian language and demeanour as an instance of syncretism. Instead, they argue that Okigbo advances a Christian propaganda. 'It is bad that Christianity has displaced our gods from the consciousness of our elite', they write.<sup>110</sup> Even worse, in their estimation, is the 'seeming revivalist who addresses our gods as if they were Christian gods'.<sup>111</sup> This strident perspective underscores a fervent rejection of what certain local readers could perceive as the encroachment of Christianity upon indigenous spirituality and cultural practices. However, it is understandable given that it is coming from readers who freely admit that their study is polemical, describing it as a piece of 'intellectual and cultural bush clearing'.<sup>112</sup> Still, their intervention appears to prioritise ideological positioning over literary analysis. Their reduction of Okigbo's juxtaposition of Igbo and Christian elements as a form of syncretism to mere Christian propaganda risks overlooking the complex ways in which the rich cultural and religious influences informing his poetry negotiate, interact, and evolve.

On the other hand, Robert Fraser recognises Okigbo's *Heavensgate* as 'a product of a deeply sophisticated mind, as steeped in the mythologies of Europe, Asia, and the ancient world as in the folklore of the rural Igbo amongst whom Okigbo grew up'.<sup>113</sup> Fraser begins his argument with the premise that the sequence can be read as an attempt by Okigbo 'to reconcile these various traditions', particularly 'the tension between Christian influences and indigenous Igbo

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. p. xi.

<sup>113</sup> Robert Fraser, 'The Achievement of Christopher Okigbo', in *West African Poetry: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 104.

theology'.<sup>114</sup> He suggests that Okigbo is navigating the complex landscape of his spiritual heritage, trying to find a balance between 'the residual Christian' teachings from his upbringing and the indigenous beliefs of his Igbo culture.<sup>115</sup> Nonetheless, Fraser's reading leans more towards the argument that these influences compete within Okigbo's quest, reflecting an ambivalence towards Christianity rather than a harmonious syncretism. For instance, Fraser interprets the Christian language in the 'Watermaid' section of *Heavensgate* as expressing 'a sense of remoteness from a homogeneous, authentically traditional truth', which indicates Fraser's view that Okigbo feels a disconnection from a pure, traditional Igbo spirituality due to the overlay of Christian elements.<sup>116</sup> In the poem 'Newcomer', furthermore, Fraser identifies a deliberate attempt by Okigbo to distance himself from Christian influences. He perceives the poet-celebrant's plea to his mother, Anna, to shield him from Christian angels as a 'rejection aimed at the heavenly host', thereby reflecting an effort to repudiate rather than seamlessly integrate Christian beliefs with indigenous ones.<sup>117</sup> Fraser's reading seems to overlook that the speaker of the poem is, at the same time, admitting that the mask he wears is his own, distinct from the ancestral masks: 'Mask over my face – | my own mask, not ancestral' (17). This admission indicates that Okigbo is not rejecting Christian influences in favour of Igbo ones but is instead evolving a personal synthesis.

Okigbo's use of Christian language and imagery neither means he forsakes Idoto nor represents his complete endorsement of Christianity. Instead, *Heavensgate* is, as Curwen Best and Obi Nwakanma rightly observe, an attempt to transcend normative structures of identity. Despite considering the bearing of Okigbo's biography on his poetry, Best and Nwakanma

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

overlook Okigbo's personal conviction of a potential resilient reconciliation between the two cultures. Best, on the one hand, interprets the poem as reflecting Okigbo's 'sociocultural concerns' about colonialism, represented by the persona's internal struggle and dilemma at acknowledging the incompatibility of the Igbo native religion and the foreign Western belief system.<sup>118</sup> He argues that the biographical figure of Okigbo faced a perpetual dilemma: whether to side with his maternal grandfather, the former priest of the Ajani shrine deity, or with his father, the Catholic schoolteacher who baptized Christopher into the Catholic faith.<sup>119</sup> According to Best, thus, Okigbo realised the 'macrocosmic signification of the microcosmic insurrections within his soul, and he dared to dramatize them'.<sup>120</sup> Best is somewhat deterministic and stubborn in his analysis. While acknowledging the protagonist's anguish in supplicating to Idoto, Best implies that the protagonist seems familiar with the ritual world, therefore possessing a degree of latent self-confidence that hinders genuine repentance.<sup>121</sup> Best also takes issue with the poet-protagonist's concern to syncretise traditional Igbo and Western religious forms by using what he describes as an 'imported' language to address the native goddess.<sup>122</sup> He argues that the language of the poet-protagonist's ritual sounds ostentatious, 'pretentious', and 'sacrilegious', revealing a soul lacking the trust, sincerity, and commitment essential to true worship.<sup>123</sup>

Likewise, Nwakanma considers the poem as alluding to how Okigbo perceived his 'conversion to Roman Catholic Christianity', his 'elitist colonial education', and 'his temporal relocation within the empire as the sources of his spiritual agony, and of his inconsolable

---

<sup>118</sup> Curwen Best, *Kamau Brathwaite and Christopher Okigbo: Art, Politics, and the Music of Ritual* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 119.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

separation from the primal source of identity'.<sup>124</sup> Nwakanma begins by acknowledging that Okigbo rejected narrow, essentialist categorisations of either himself or his poetry. He, for instance, appreciates the poet's appropriation of 'signs and tropes from a vast range of sources', mainly local and colonial, seeing it as emphasising the transcultural, 'cosmopolitan, hybrid, transborder nature of signs and language in the postcolonial text'.<sup>125</sup> Nonetheless, in a manner akin to Best, Nwakanma insists that Okigbo 'exhibits a recursive fantasy, displacement, and disorientation of a problematic imaginative cosmos', which signifies his struggles with the colonial heritage and his agonies of self-expression.<sup>126</sup> In this sense, readings like those of Chinweizu and his peers seem to overthink the challenges of integrating Western, specifically Catholic, imagery into the Igbo belief system. To argue that this double-toned poetry dislocated the poet from his local setting would obscure what emerges from Okigbo's interviews as a distinct, rather atypical, attempt to evolve a personal worship code that is initially grounded in his ancestral belief system, specifically in his role as a priest to Idoto, which is then updated to include his Catholic self and further extended to express his current issues and developments as a modern African poet.

The inconsistent biographical readings often shared by Okigbo's readers are further compounded by a common tendency to overlook the structural quality of the text, leading to significant interpretive gaps. Nwakanma, Egudu, and Chinweizu and his fellow writers completely dismiss the interconnectedness of the five poems in *Heavensgate*. Instead, they selectively extract examples to support their perspectives without considering the poem as a whole, thus missing the spiritual journey it portrays. Nwakanma and Egudu base their

---

<sup>124</sup> Obi Nwakanma, 'Okigbo Agonistes: Postcolonial Subjectivity in 'Limits' and 'Distances'', *Matatu*, 33 (2006), pp. 334-335, doi:10.1163/18757421-033001037.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 327.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

analyses on the psalmodic strains of the initiatory scene, emphasising Okigbo's anguished cry as the 'prodigal' returning to ritual and memory. On the contrary, the conclusion Chinweizu and his peers make about *Heavensgate* as a superficial Christian ritual that fail to evoke Idoto is based solely on the initiatory scene. Best's interpretation of the poem as plotless fragmentations leads him to renege from feeling that the sequence before 'Newcomer' ends 'with a resounding degree of success, accomplishment, and celebration', concluding that *Heavensgate* represents an unsuccessful attempt at syncretism.<sup>127</sup> Yesufu stands out as one of the few readers who recognise the unity and organisation of the poems. However, his application of the universal monomyth structure to describe the poet-protagonist's progression overlooks crucial contextual details, particularly the meaning of Okigbo's incorporation of a Christian mass framework into a culturally and personally specific quest. While Yesufu acknowledges the broader ritualistic quest featuring a poet-protagonist engaging in ceremonial worship, cleansing, and sacrifice to reconnect with his ancestral belief system, he tends to bypass examples of Okigbo employing Christian imageries for the sake of constructing a narrative of a smooth and successful return to Idoto.

The approach I take departs from previous readings of *Heavensgate* by adopting a literary-oriented close reading that is also attentive to the cultural and personal context of the text. I consider the cultural and personal climate out of which *Heavensgate* emerged as well as a close analysis of its language and imagery, which is steeped in local Igbo and Christian traditions. My aim is to examine what Okigbo sought to achieve by juxtaposing disparate elements of the two belief systems to which he belonged. This holistic approach also examines the organisation of the poems and how they depict a sense of connectedness between the poet-protagonist cleansing ritual, initiation, all the way through his rebirth;

---

<sup>127</sup> Best, p. 124.

understanding this complex ritualist journey which reproduces the tripartite grammar of the rites of passage and in which the state and attitude of the poet-protagonist vary across the different stations of his journey.

### **Okigbo's journey beyond the heaven's gate**

#### Invocation: initiating the journey

*Heavensgate* describes a transformative journey where Okigbo, the poet-protagonist, casts away the ancestral priestly mask, embracing his identity as a poet – a synthesis of his Igbo heritage and Christian influences, albeit uniquely personalised. The path to renewal comprises five stations or poems. In the first poem, ‘The Passage’, which describes his pre-liminal cleansing ceremony, he contemplates his transformation from a priest figure to a bird. ‘Initiations’ then delves into his liminality, where he reassesses ineffective past initiations in both religion and poetry before deciding to break away from them. In ‘Watermaid,’ a promising yet short encounter occurs between the poet-protagonist and a water muse. ‘Lustra’ follows, presenting an offering that leads to both the climax and the beginning of resolution to Okigbo’s quest, while ‘Newcomer’ marks a fuller integration of the priest-protagonist into his new status as a bird/poet. Here, Okigbo ultimately achieves a state of wholeness through a reunion with a creative manifestation of Idoto. The Idoto he retrieves as a result of this quest will embody a creative spirit, a muse whose new realm converges between sky and land.

When we first encounter the poet-protagonist in the introit of ‘The Passage’, we hear him reciting a propitiatory supplication to his goddess. He throws off his spurious cloak: ‘naked I stand’ (3) in a gesture that symbolises his willingness to abandon his prior self, and in acknowledgement of his humility and feebleness, he leans ‘barefoot’ on the ‘oilbean’, waiting

to be admitted to Idoto's shrine. Okigbo emphasises his sorrow and remorse by the use of extended metaphor, which builds an evocative, prolonged parallel between the celebrant and the biblical prodigal. Like the prodigal son, who traded grace for wealth and went astray from his father's home, but soon finds himself destitute and decides to return to his father and beg to be allowed home, the poet-protagonist returns to Idoto hoping for acceptance and reconciliation. What specific transgression he committed against his goddess is never revealed in the poem, but the tension is clear. Although he is depicted as a 'watchman', he is not allowed a guardian role but waits for a 'watchword' to enter heaven (3). His entry is not immediately approved. Instead, he is lost in Idoto's legend, waiting 'barefoot' under her power; he cries out, hoping for acceptance, 'out of the depths my cry: | give ear and hearken...' (3), yet the goddess does not answer his pleas. Idoto's inattentiveness persists so long that Okigbo, in capturing the protagonist's plea for acceptance, renders the cry unbounded by a time frame: the absence of a main verb in the line 'out of the depths my cry: | give ear and hearken...' makes it impossible to infer whether the cry occurred in the past, present, or might continue into the future. This open sense of time is reinforced by his use of punctuation, as he uses a colon to join the two lines so as to signal continuity, while ending the line with an ellipsis further suggest the long passage of time.

This climactic scene is one of the early examples of Okigbo's blending between the Igbo and Christian worlds: it is situated within a clearly demarcated Igbo spatial and spiritual setting, featuring imagery of the riverside Idoto shrine and locally significant markers like the oilbean. The poet-protagonist, in this context, resembles 'the kindred spirits' of children gathered around the oilbean tree awaiting 'their intended mothers'; he, too, longs for mother Idoto's acceptance as his own mother.<sup>128</sup> Yet, amidst this local environment, Okigbo integrates

---

<sup>128</sup> Okoye-Ugwu, "beyond the limits of the dream", p. 6.

colonial influences, notably evident in his use of the biblical prodigal metaphor. This metaphor has been read as an attempt to position Idoto in the role of the forgiving Father. It thus prompted readers, such as Egudu and Yesufu, to presume that *Heavensgate* is a narrative of return from Christ to Idoto; it is a return to Idoto in a Christian manner as if she were a Christian god, according to Chinweizu and his fellow writers. However, such interpretations do not effectively capture the nature Idoto. Despite her portrayal as a supreme deity in *Heavensgate*, Idoto cannot simply be seen as a substitute for the Christian supreme deity because she is fundamentally different and not equivalent to Him.

Idoto contradicts the monotheistic, non-totemic, patriarchal perspective of the Christian theological deity on two levels. On one hand, unlike the Christian conception of deity, the ‘watery presence’ (3) attributed to Idoto in the poem imbues a specific body of water to the deity, diverging from the abstract nature of the Christian God. On the other hand, this watery presence and the emphasis on Idoto’s feminine essence align her with an earth force, which, according to the Igbo arrangement of the universe, dwells a spatial dimension opposite to the one the transcendent Christian father occupies. That being said, Okigbo’s emphasis on matriarchal divinity is not necessarily a direct refutation of the colonial Christian erasure of the female from the Igbo African pantheon – not in the sense that he valorises the Igbo belief system to the extent that he devalues Christianity. The poet never denounces the Christian Father, but, as I mentioned earlier in the chapter, relocates Idoto from earth to heaven. This subtle yet significant relocation is a bid to enlarge – rework – the Igbo pantheon to make room for the non-ancestral Father and His heavenly realm, which is made more accommodating for the feminine principle.

His return to Idoto, therefore, should not be construed as an abandonment of the Christian God, nor should his acceptance of the latter be perceived as sacrilegious to the former.

Okigbo's opening invocation of Idoto is not meant to 'absorb the Igbo pantheon into the assembly of lesser Christian godlings', as critiqued by Chinweizu and others.<sup>129</sup> Nor is it only to domesticate Christianity into an existing indigenous system that venerates the feminine. Rather, it is a navigation of multiple spiritual belongings, pointing to a fluid, multiple, and complex form of spiritual identity that cannot be simply contained within the categorical confines of any singular religious doctrine. Okigbo seems to build on Igbo and Christian references to encode a higher order of spirituality that, while it may be interpreted as a response to the ontological absence of the female deity that Christianity caused, does not entail a complete renunciation of Christianity. At heart, Christianity and Igbo traditions hold significant value for Okigbo, not in terms of their disparity, but rather in their potential for cooperation and compatibility. This is not to suggest that he misunderstood Christianity and Igbo beliefs as inherently related elements, nor do I argue that he aimed to blend them into a melting pot where local and colonial influences assimilate to the extent that they cease to be distinctly African or Western. Instead, Okigbo seems to negotiate the possibility of bringing the two cultures together by gradually incorporating references from both sources. Perhaps they initially appear as incompatible, but they can eventually come together organically and form a new and unified entity.

By the time we have moved onto the next stanza, the poet-protagonist embarks on the 'DARK WATERS of the beginning' (4), which marks the entrance to the stream that will eventually lead to his homecoming. He observes the emergence of a combination of improbable occurrences and visual concepts, detecting a potential organic fusion between them: 'Rain and sun in single combat' (4), coalescing into a 'Rainbow on far side, arched like boa bent to kill, | foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of' (4). Similarly, the 'violet and short' 'rays' of light

---

<sup>129</sup> Chinweizu, p. 192.

pierce darkness and ‘foreshadow the fire that is dreamed of’ (4). The rainbow, as Nyong J. Udoeyop notes in his analysis of the poem, carries both Christian and Igbo symbolism. It can be read in two ways at once, according to which cultural element is in play. On the one hand, the emergence of the rainbow evokes the Bible’s Genesis flood narrative, wherein the rainbow symbolises God’s covenant never to ‘destroy the world by flood’ again.<sup>130</sup> On the other, the arched rainbow resembling ‘the yawning boa’ is an Igbo image; depicting it as ‘bent to kill’ in the poem foreshadows ‘destruction’.<sup>131</sup> This double meaning leads Udoeyop to read a tension in the mind of the poet-protagonist, an awareness of his double vision and ‘divided sensibility’.<sup>132</sup> For Udoeyop, ‘the image [of the rainbow] is not only a fusion of the two possibilities of mercy and destruction, but also fuses traditional and Christian mythologies, and generates a religious question as to who indeed is the real saviour – the Christian God or the native one’.<sup>133</sup> This unresolved question causes, according to Udoeyop, ‘a dichotomy in the poet’s identity’, since he feels he is at once “a wagtail, to tell | the tangled-wood-tail” and “a sunbird, to mourn | a mother on a spray”.<sup>134</sup> Here, Okigbo continues with the juxtaposition of traditional and Christian imagery. He pictures the poet-protagonist as a bird, simultaneously recounting “the tangled-wood-tale” that represents the Christian faith with the image of the cross in tangled-wood, and mourning the “mother on a spray”, the native religion abandoned with the arrival of the new faith.<sup>135</sup>

However, this interpretation is not the sole possible explanation of the ‘divided sensibility’ experienced in ‘The Passage’. The poet’s attitude and manner of juxtaposing these pairs of

---

<sup>130</sup> Nyong J. Udoeyop, ‘A Branch of Giant Fennel’, in *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*, ed. by Donatus Ibe Nwoga (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984), p. 56.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

contrasting symbols or forces also indicate his recognition of the connection between these elements and their potentially inevitable coexistence. Okigbo does not really present the Christian and the Igbo as competing impulses, loyalties, or allegiances, but rather invests in their cross-cultural referencing to bring into view a sense of interconnectedness between them. Juxtaposition, in this context, creates a connection between seemingly unrelated elements and images when they are placed side by side. The rainbow, which emerged by juxtaposing ‘Rain and sun in single combat’ (4), generates such a connection, prompting the possibility of the evolution of Igbo and Christian elements in a new coexisting form. In the same way, the poet makes use of image of the bird-poet to consider the relationship between the elements with closer scrutiny, for he is an English wagtail and an African sunbird all at once. In this sense, the poet awareness of the conflict is accompanied by an aspiration towards a resolution. And so, while the bird ‘would-be poet’ suffers in the “DARK WATERS of the beginning” (4), enveloped in the ‘gloom of his artistic soul’, he ‘espies “Rays, violet and short” foreshadowing “the fire that is dreamed of” and “the rain that is dreamed of”, according to Yesufu.<sup>136</sup> Consequently, the anticipated “fire”, which once symbolised ‘despair and destruction’, now represents ‘inspiration’.<sup>137</sup> Similarly, the “rain” is no longer an overwhelming flood of thoughts but instead a refreshing shower that brings fertile ideas to a previously ‘sterile mind’.<sup>138</sup> Henceforth, the poet-protagonist’s quest becomes a pursuit for the artistic inspiration he briefly and faintly glimpsed.

However, at this stage of the journey, Okigbo is still not certain about when and how this quest will come to fruition. Therefore, the celebrant, now identified by his role as a poet, a wagtail and a sunbird, approaches water cautiously: ‘on one leg standing, | in silence at the

---

<sup>136</sup> Yesufu, p. 240.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

passage, | the young bird at the passage' (4). Here, we see Okigbo again explicitly engages with the Igbo local elements to express the uncertainty of this position: the stance resembles that of the Igbo proverbial wise chicken who, upon arriving to a new environment, assumes this stance until it gets used to the new world and stands on both legs.<sup>139</sup> This stance, according to Obiora Udechukwu, is a mode of behaviour oriented towards survival.<sup>140</sup>

The uncertainty of the poet-protagonist, initially hinted at by the one-leg standing bird image, intensifies in the subsequent stanza where he finds himself at 'crossroads', 'where all roads meet' (5). The poet makes use of the image of 'crossroads', which is symbolic as a point where several roads intersect and where a momentous decision must be made. In this sense, 'crossroads' represents a critical juncture in the poet-protagonist's rite of passage, as he navigates his double cultural inheritance to bring into effect a coexistence he wishes for. In Igbo traditional ritual practice, a crossroad holds significance as a turning point where spirits meet to guide the celebrant. While in a local context, one expects the poet-protagonist to offer sacrifices at this transitional moment to appease these guiding spirits, we find him within the premise of a Christian Church 'behind the bell tower', met only by 'SILENT FACES at crossroads: | festivity in black... | [...] behind the bell tower, | into the hot garden | where all roads meet: | festivity in black...' (5). It is a funeral scene, and the guiding spirits appear unappeased at the Church, thus offering no direction, and the expected colourful, joyous festivity renders itself black. Okigbo continues with over-layering traditional and Christian imagery. He evokes his mother 'Anna', who passed away when he was very young, picturing her holding 'the knobs' of the Church door and appealing to her to listen to him from the

---

<sup>139</sup> Obiora Udechukwu, 'Aesthetics and the Mythic Imagination: Notes on Christopher Okigbo's *Heavensgate* and Uche Okeke's Drawings', in *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*, ed. by Donatus Ibe Nwoga (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984), p. 80.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

‘crossroads’ (5). In his plea to Anna, Okigbo draws upon the traditional Igbo manner of ancestor-invocation. However, Anna, who embraced Christianity in her lifetime, is depicted as being associated with Christian worship, ‘where the players of loft pipe organs | rehearse old lovely fragments’ (5). Here, Anna serves as a hinge that connects the poet with both his Christian and traditional sides. At this liminal phase of his journey, the celebrant seeks protection, amidst a dilemma he lives as a bird with one foot in Christianity and the other in traditional beliefs. His attempt at reconciling the two spiritual sources has not yet been fruitful. Consequently, he withdraws from the bleak welcome he gets at the crossroads, seeking solace in the cornfields: ‘listening in cornfields | among the windplayers, | listening to the wind leaning over | its loveliest fragment …’ (5).

‘The Passage’ is a patchwork of different allusions and striking imagery that Okigbo uses to juxtapose Idoto, an earth mother goddess, with the Christian God, a heavenly Father, subverting the reader’s expectation by relocating Idoto to heaven and addressing her in a Christian manner. There are other instances of juxtaposition in the image of the rainbow which emerges in the sunny rainy sky, and the twofold image of the bird/poet, around which the two cultures intersect. In the first section of ‘The Passage’, we saw the celebrant, naked and barefoot, taking part in a process of confession and cleansing analogous to the pre-liminal cleansing ceremonies known in the traditional rites of passage. The motif of rites of passage proves especially apt in ratifying the idea of initiation and rebirth of the true self. As we follow the poet-protagonist on his journey, we encounter his uncertainty about the future, which puts him in a state of ambiguity and vulnerability equivalent to that which occurs in the middle transitional (liminal) stage of a rite of passage. His progress through the gate and crossroads represents essential steps towards the final epiphany, while the death scenery at the threshold, in closing, is a rebirth foretold. This opening poem is followed by a series of

ritualistic movements that capture the protagonist, in the words of the poet, ‘at various stations of his cross’. It is against this background that ‘The Passage’ could be read as exemplifying the third and last stage of reincorporation in a rite of passage. This final stage is often marked by a celebration upon which the initiate, who after a phase of liminality, is granted the new status he journeyed for. In this sense, the poet-protagonist’s quest is not terminated by his return to the dualistic matrix of Idoto in heaven; conversely, this return marks the launching of the quest. If we are to think of it in terms relevant to Okigbo, this quest would be a journey of self-discovery that is undertaken by a celebrant who, longing to weave the spiritual and artistic vocations together, transitions from his previous role as a priest-protagonist to explore his ontological potential as a bird-protagonist.

### Threshold: crossing boundaries

‘Initiations’ is the next significant ritualistic movement in *Heavensgate*. In this poem, the poet-protagonist recollects a physically and emotionally traumatic process of initiations that he had to undergo to become a part of a particular cult. The new identity, he remembers, was inflicted on him by a ‘red-hot blade’, marking his chest with a ‘SCAR OF the crucifix’ (6).

SCAR OF the crucifix

over the breast,

by red blade inflicted

by red-hot blade,

on right breast witnesseth

mystery which I, initiate,

received newly naked

upon waters of the genesis  
from Kepkanly (6).

Okigbo's allusion to the 'crucifix' and 'waters of the genesis' suggests that the initiation has taken a form similar to that of Christian baptism. The poem can thus be read as a statement against the pain inflicted by the 'SCAR OF the crucifix' – the Christian crucifix. Sunday Anozie argues that such a mystical moment was too large for the celebrant; and, regardless of how painful it might have been, the initiation was unsuccessful because it amounted to nothing more than 'the scratching of the breast with a "red-hot blade", leaving nothing but a mere "scar", and unleashing before the celebrant nothing but 'a vision of chaos".<sup>141</sup>

Anozie also rightly observes that this ritual has taken an unusual form: it was 'received at the expense of blood and from Kepkanly', a local teacher, which prompts the question of whether the blood was of a pagan Christ.<sup>142</sup> Anozie does not investigate the double implication of this reference because what matters for him was not the type of initiation, but rather the negative effect it had on the celebrant. Okigbo's footnote indicates that Kepkanly is '[a] half-serious half-comical primary school teacher of the late thirties' (6). As clarified by Donatus Ibe Nwoga, the name is coined by the poet, deriving from the sing-song marching command in Igbo: 'Aka ekpe ... Aka nli ...', which translates to 'left hand ... right hand', a command that was commonly uttered by teachers in those days and repeated by pupils.<sup>143</sup> When it is realised that Kepkanly, who initiated the celebrant into this mystery, is a local personage associated with Idoto, the poet's implications become clearer. Okigbo is not exclusively talking about the unpleasant weight of Christianisation but rather the coercion into accepting a controlling

---

<sup>141</sup> Sunday O. Anozie, 'Okigbo's *Heavensgate*: a Study of Art as Ritual'. in *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*, compiled and edited by Donatus Ibe Nwoga (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984), p. 50.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Donatus Ibe Nwoga, 'Christopher Okigbo: the man and the poet', in *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*, ed. by Donatus Ibe Nwoga (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984), p. 16.

system that leads to his ‘avoiding decisions’ (6). As Best elucidates, the vulnerability of the poet-protagonist, epitomised by his acceptance of John’s baptism, causes a tendency to avoid decisions, ‘the effect of which is reflected in the vision of the young bird at a crossroads in ‘The Passage’’.<sup>144</sup> The poet broadens the scope of his critical commentary on this form of indoctrination by manipulating the sense of time: while reflecting on latent memories of being initiated into Christianity during his early childhood, he alludes to a recent initiation he ‘received newly naked | upon waters of the genesis’ (6). This reference underscores an across-the-board critique the poet seems to offer regarding religious systems of governance.

It is the method and effect of indoctrination that is problematic to Okigbo, not the doctrine itself. Rituals that entail agony promise to grant celebrants: ‘Elemental, united in vision | of present and future’ (6). Yet they do nothing but cause celebrants to feel a ‘Mystery, which barring | the errors of the rendering | witnesseth | red-hot blade on right breast | the scar of the crucifix’ (7). The association of Kepkanly, who the poet describes as a ludicrous ‘half-serious half-comical’ figure, with the initiation rite stresses the absurdity of such a ritual. Initiations guided by local agents like the childhood teacher, ‘Kepkanly’, or even colonial figures such as ‘John the Baptist’, offer promises of wholeness and salvation, but, regrettably, ‘At confluence of planes, the angle: | man loses man, loses vision’ (6). Okigbo suggests that initiation into Christianity, native religion, or any formal religion, is a ‘gambit’ because it relies on ‘inhibitions’ (6), thereby denying freedom and innocence. Okigbo’s criticism is aimed at strict conformity, organised fraud, and religious obsession, all of which foster passivity rather than activity. He pokes at those who succumb to the dictates of institutionalised religious systems and consequently forfeit their ability to make independent decisions. Using a complex system of quadrilateral figures, he hierarchically categorises such individuals: at the pinnacle of

---

<sup>144</sup> Best, p. 122.

conformity lie those within the rigid ‘square’, encompassing ‘the moron, | fanatics and priests and popes, | organizing secretaries and | party managers’ (7). In the second tier, the ‘the rhombus’ gathers ‘brothers and deacons, | liberal politicians, | selfish selfseekers’ (7). Because their lives have become defined by duty, obligation, he considers them as ‘good | doing nothing at all’ (7). The poet-protagonist positions himself within the third group that takes the shape of a ‘quadrangle’ (7). Within this more flexible figure, the poet-protagonist fits ‘the rest, me and you ...’ (7), those who are farthest from conformity to any system. This classification precedes a similar one in another sequence titled *Distances*, where the poet-protagonist aligns himself with the ‘prophets’ and ‘martyrs’ at the apex of the ‘pilgrims | bound for Shilboleth’ (56). While the quest for Shilboleth in the context of *Distances* appears more in pursuit of an artistic enlightenment rather than a spiritual one, the symbol of the ‘crucifix’ also reappears, here carried by the poet-pilgrim, whose crucifix signifies more his artistic salvation than his Christian faith: ‘IN THE scattered line of pilgrims | bound for Shilboleth | in my hand the crucifix | the torn branch the censer’ (56).

The appropriation of this religious symbol to suit secular artistic concerns is a further illustration of Okigbo’s paradoxical attitude towards the orthodoxy of religions. It seems that Okigbo accepts the ceremonial and aesthetic aspects of religion while, at the same time, he rejects its orthodox formulation. The relevance of this point to our discussion is the meaning which Okigbo seems to attribute to organised religions, be it Christian or Igbo. He perceives a common denominator across all religions, shared by the dogmatic leaders whose goal is to enforce uniformity at the expense of freedom and individual agency. His attack on ‘the moron, | fanatics and priests and popes, | organizing secretaries and | party managers’ as people who ‘are good | doing nothing at all’ (7) expresses this point. These people are nothing but agents of ‘inhibitions’ (6), which he views as a negation of life. The poet’s resentfulness

of such extreme orthodoxy is evident given that it denies the individual right of self-realisation and self-expression. This critical attitude echoes what Okigbo expressed, in the previously cited interviews, about his preference of the artistic practice over religious ones. Therefore, it seems fairly plausible to argue that, in theory and practice, Okigbo aimed at pitting poetry against religious institutionalisation, lest it hinders the growth of his poetic genius. This may be regarded as Okigbo's advance form of 'personal religion'; his conviction of a need to discard religious orthodoxy in favour of a creative life and to establish a balance between the pagan impulses of his imagination, and the religious tensions in his life within a modernist aesthetics. At the most personal level, Okigbo sought in poetry an alternative medium to perform his 'full functions, as chief priest of Idoto'.<sup>145</sup> By evolving his personal religion, he becomes free to draw from both artistic and ceremonial sources. He therefore criticises those intolerant positions and angles taken in 'Initiations'. Nevertheless, as Best observes, the poet does not appear at that stage of his journey to have worked out alternative angles or alternative models that suit him, for he ends up placing himself in the spacious, slightly shapeless, yet four-sided figure of a 'quadrangle'.<sup>146</sup> Things change later in 'Newcomer', where he invents his own symbol, a five-sided pentagon, to affirm his inconformity to any system. For now, however, even on reflection, 'solitude within me remembers Kepkanly' (7).

Okigbo insinuates other examples of dogmatism. The plural form in the title 'Initiations' implies that there is more than one initiation. After pondering on his painful experience of being educated by the schoolteacher Kepkanly, other teachers appear. These are two local prophet-figures who seem to have initiated the celebrant into the art of song and poetry:

---

<sup>145</sup> Okigbo in Marjory Whitelaw, p. 36.

<sup>146</sup> Best, p. 122.

‘Jadum’, Okigbo tells us in the footnotes, is ‘[a] half-demented village minstrel’ (8) while ‘Upandru’ is ‘[a] village explainer’ (9). Having established his critical stance from religious obligations, Okigbo, in the second section of ‘Initiations’, reflects on the instructed initiation he had received from the two sages, Jadum and Upandru. Jadum’s teaching, the poet-protagonist reports, is replete with precepts and warnings; he is ‘a minstrel who singeth) | to shepherds, with a lute on his lip’ (8). With a voice resonating in rhetorical proverbs, Jadum, whose home is the Nigerian ‘Rockland’ (8), is depicted as wary of the intrusion of a foreign mode of religious worship into this habitat. He, for instance, advises the poet-protagonist to stay away from the alien ‘smell of the incense’ (8), alluding to the incense used for Catholic religious rituals. Jadum also cautions the poet-protagonist against the uncareful treatment and desertion of sacred native land and species, particularly warning of the perilous wandering in fields of ‘speargrass’ in darkness or investigating vipers’ dens with stockings, especially upon noticing a dead dog nearby: ‘Do not wander in speargrass, | After the lights, | Probing lairs in stockings, | To roast | The viper alive, with dog lying | Upsidedown in the crooked passage...’ (8). Thus, for Jadum, the acceptance of intrusive beliefs and the disrespect of local ones seem to carry severe repercussions. As his sternness and fervour resemble that of ‘the moron, | fanatics and priests and popes’ (7), the poet sighs ‘And there are here | the errors of the rendering...’ (8).

The Upandru section of ‘Initiations’ presents a different perspective on poetry. In an exchange of riddles, Upandru prompts the poet-protagonist to contemplate who could penetrate the depths of his thoughts: ‘Screen your bedchamber thoughts | with sun-glasses, | who could jump your eye, | your mind-window’ (9). In response, the poet-protagonist asserts: ‘And I said: | The prophet only the poet’ (9). The motif of secrecy will reappear in the following poem ‘Watermaid’ when the poet impulsively discloses a secret about his goddess.

Meanwhile, Upandru offers another interpretation: ‘And he said: Logistics. | (Which is what poetry is) ...’ (9). The poet-protagonist is intrigued by Upandru’s response, immediately equating ‘logistics’ with ‘poetry’, an equation that makes poetry an art of tactical and strategic ordering. Anozie validly points out that it is in this dialogue that Okigbo articulates his definition of poetry, one that encapsulates the ‘whole range and dimension of Okigbo’s poetry’.<sup>147</sup> Poetry, Okigbo posits, has the magic to lurk into the hidden recesses of private ‘bedchamber thoughts’ and the freedom to leap through the ‘mind-window’. It also embodies purposeful craftsmanship and careful composition, contrasting perhaps with immediate, spontaneous expression. The poet then connects this conversation about poetry to earlier recounted experiences of initiation. This time, he evokes traditional Igbo castration practice: in another exchange of riddle, Upandu demands that the ‘ram’ must ‘Disarm’ (9), alluding to a procedure performed by the Igbos on male domestic animals to curb their impulsiveness and maintain control over them. Upandru’s mention of traditional Igbo castration practice is a reminder of enforced celibacy and the constraining impact of the painful initiation mentioned at the start of the poem. For the poet-protagonist, then, life after such a regulatory operation becomes as joyless as living spiritually virtuous: ‘life without sin, without | life’ (6). It is no surprise, then, that the disheartened poet-protagonist responds to Upandu with a metaphor reflecting his desire for artistic and personal freedom: ‘And I said: | Except by rooting, | who could pluck yam tubers from their base?’ (9) Realising that the life cycle of the yam plant is terminated once it has been dug up out of the soil, he disappointedly repeats: ‘And there are here | the errors of the rendering...’ (9) Of course, the reference to the disarmed ram in the stanza could also be a critique of the enforced celibacy within the Catholic clergy. Invariably, as Stella Okoye-Ugwu argues, ‘it means that when one is invested with this high office, he

---

<sup>147</sup> Anozie, p. 53.

must give up his sensual life'.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, given the cultural and vocational context of the stanza, this allusion transcends its ritualistic origins to serve an artistic purpose: while employed to express the poet's rejection of the constraining impact of such painful rituals, it also clashes with the diverse and liberal range the poet desires for himself and his poetry.

While it is certainly true that Okigbo, in 'Initiations', was critical of the strict doctrine of Christianity, the insistence that his rejection of the salt water of John the Baptist implies a preference of Igbo modes of institutionalisation over Christian ones dismisses the different types of initiation he rejected across the poem. A close attention to the details of this sequence revealed four initiations, three of which points to the fact that he did not resist Christian baptism by turning to native ways of instruction: Okigbo found in the local figure of Kepkanly a way to express his unacceptance of the confining Igbo tribal rituals. Although he favoured the poetic practice over the religious, Okigbo found in the poetic figures of Jadum and Upandru further examples of initiations he was not keen about. This is to say that, in 'Initiations', Okigbo addressed the past, reassessed old modes of identification he acquired from both cultures, but questioned their potential to offer him a space to flourish when reaching to the new. One thus can see in Okigbo's poetry an attempt reflective of what he mentioned in his interviews about forging a personal consciousness that draws from the past, both local and colonial, but departs from the constraining measures it imposes. At this stage of his search for fulfilment, Okigbo appears determined to go beyond normative constructs of identity. This is an atypical endeavour that can easily be misrecognised by readers whose perspective is governed by binary conceptions. It is worth reiterating here that the poet's

---

<sup>148</sup> Okoye-Ugwu, p. 8.

attempt to push beyond the boundaries of his local identity does not mean he sought to be viewed as less Igbo/African.

In *Heavensgate*, as mentioned earlier, the quest blazes a path of five stations that mirror the threefold structure of rites of passage. As part of the second liminal phase, ‘Initiations’ is a time of scrutiny and reflection on central values and axioms, and of gaining a better understanding of the self and its surroundings. It is, therefore, a critical moment of withdrawal from prior modes, a debunking of normative spiritual and artistic religiosity, and an invitation to the liberty of creativity. If celebrants typically get involved in mandatory rituals as passive and guided performers, the poet-protagonist here seems to be in full control of his own ritual, making the most major decisions regarding how, when, and where it takes place. In the third movement of *Heavensgate*, titled ‘Watermaid’, the poet-protagonist sits by a beach, with his ‘eyes open, of the prodigal’ gazing ‘upward to heaven shoot | where stars will fall from’ (10). Details of imagery throughout this sequence harken back to ‘The Passage’. Okigbo evokes heaven and water again, alluding to the mutual cooperation between male and female principles and Christian and Igbo elements. At the outset of his quest, these elements provided a spiritual and artistic sanctuary, in the form of a rainbow, that accommodated his deep-seated divided sensibility. This idea of compatibility between two forces – the heavenly sky and the motherly water – is also implied in the context of ‘Watermaid’, with the poet-protagonist adopting the Christian association of providence with Heaven to ‘count her blessings, my white queen’ (12). Another instance of imagery reminiscent of ‘The Passage’ is the sea image, which evokes memories of Idoto’s ‘watery presence’ (3). We are also reminded of the poet-protagonist’s state as a prodigal, who was knocking at the goddess’ heaven’s gates. Now, he is sitting by the beach invoking the water goddess, who appears to have transformed into a slightly different figure: a regal, powerful yet wild Watermaid.

Okigbo apparently intended that the reader identify this Watermaid with Idoto. However, his depiction of her as having the crueler disposition of a ‘lioness’ seems related to her secretive nature, which has been exposed:

Secret I have told into no ear,  
save into a dughole, to hold, not to drown with –  
Secret I have planted into beachsand  
  
now breaks  
  
salt-white surf on the stones and me,  
and lobsters and shells  
  
in iodine smell –  
  
maid of the salt-emptiness,  
sophisticreamy,  
  
whose secret I have covered up with beachsand... (10)

Curwen Best wittily associates the secret of the Watermaid with the hidden thoughts, those ‘bedchamber thoughts’ within the ‘mind-window’ mentioned earlier. According to Best, such secrets ‘must be rooted out and confessed in Idoto’s watery presence before any meaningful spiritual connection can be forged’.<sup>149</sup> The secret exposed here, according to Best, pertains to the true state of the poet-protagonist’s soul, the guilt of his prodigality and his inability to give up his Christianity, which makes his repentance dishonest.<sup>150</sup> But the secret that the poet-protagonist was supposed to keep ‘covered up with beachsand’ is not his, but hers, and the revelation of the secret is a revelation of her true nature, instead of his. Thus, the significance

---

<sup>149</sup> Best, pp. 122-123.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

of the secret motif lies in its connection to her and the betrayal she felt following the disclosure of this secret (to us). She is a secret so confidential that the poet-protagonist is warned not to share; if he feels the burden of secrecy too heavy to bear alone, he should, then, bury it in the earth symbolised by the ‘dughole’. The poet-protagonist is not necessarily guilty of betrayal because the natural imagery of the breaking ‘salt-white surf’ and the resurfacing ‘lobsters and shells’ indicate the forceful emergence of the water goddess, despite his efforts to keep her covered.

When the Watermaid appears by the shore, answering the summon of the celebrant, she hardly allows him to see her: ‘BRIGHT | with the armpit-dazzle of a lioness, | she answers’, but ‘So brief her presence – | match-flare in wind’s breath’ (11). Her arrival is foreshadowed by a scene like that envisioned between the compatible sun and rain in ‘The Passage’: ‘Shadow of rain over sunbeaten beach, | shadow of rain over man with woman’ (10). She then manifests ‘wearing white light upon her’ and ‘crowned with moonlight’ (11). One can sense that we are meant to believe that, as a variation of Idoto, this Watermaid is endowed with qualities different from the native water goddess described earlier. The emphasis on her beastly, destructive manner, coupled with her whiteness, as the poet refers to her as ‘my white queen’, ‘white goddess’, and ‘wearing white light upon her’, aligns her with the mythical figure of ‘The White Goddess’, who is recognised by Robert Graves as a wellspring of poetic inspiration. Yeusufu points out this similarity, arguing that Okigbo endows his goddess with this surrealism to ‘represent the evanescence and elusiveness of this sought-after artistic ideal/state’.<sup>151</sup> The association of the Watermaid with poetic inspiration is further illuminated in the following stanza, as the poet-protagonist plaintively declares that her brief presence was not enough to nourish his poetic soul. He also observes that, when the ‘white queen’ abandons

---

<sup>151</sup> Yeusufu, p. 240.

him ‘sinking ungathered’ (11), the stars of heaven depart as well, and ‘the sky in monocle | surveys the worldunder’ (13) looking for the queen. The poet-protagonist broods on his loss, plunging in a state of utter confusion. He finds himself in a predicament, abandoned and questioning his identity: ‘AND I WHO am here abandoned’ (12). The vanishing of the stars leaves him disoriented, unaware of time and place: ‘The stars have departed, | and I – where am I?’ (13) Like an insect, he can only feel with his ‘antennae’ during this moment of isolation and loss of vision, and the song (or poem) which he can now sing is only a ‘broken monody’ (13). It is with this note of disappointment that the poem concludes. Although the prodigal’s hidden guilt is never meant to be clearly stated, one can sense that it is about embedding the water deity with muse-like qualities, transforming her from native goddess Idoto to an African equivalent to Graves’s ‘White Goddess’. In other words, it signifies a prodigality resulting from his wanting to worship her as a spiritual deity and his esoteric faith in her as a source that nourishes his creative soul.

### Rebirth: regaining cosmic harmony

The poet-protagonist must present an offering if he is to appease the goddess to regain the poetic insight that eluded him in ‘Watermaid’. This offering scene takes place in his fourth sequence ‘Lustra’, which unfolds in three stages beginning with his intention towards a hill: ‘to where springs the fountain | there to draw from’ (14). The imagery of drawing from a springing fountain suggests not only the symbolic cleansing properties of water, but also its capacity to bring forth fluidity, newness, and creativity. In ‘Lustra’ the poet-protagonist steers towards Idoto, the spiritual destination, through an aesthetic path; religion merges with the creative enterprise as the once spiritually revered ‘watery presence’ of Idoto transforms into a fountain-head of poetic inspiration. The poet-protagonist clammers to the hill ‘body and soul |

whitewashed in the moondew' (14), completely opening both his inner and outer self to the goddess he is about to encounter. Here, we observe his ascent, his movement upwards towards the goddess who appears to now inhabit a realm loftier than any river or see's 'watery presence'. In the second stage of the poem, the poet-protagonist proceeds with his sacrifice. This time, in a purely ancestral manner, he approaches the 'palm grove' and offers 'a new laid egg' and 'a white hen at midterm' while holding 'five | fingers of chalk...' (14-15). In Igbo cosmology, these sacrificial items symbolise purity and cleansing.<sup>152</sup> However, the poet's commitment to ancestral modes of offering, evident in both pursuing the female goddess and adhering to what appears to be a prescribed sacrifice, does not mark an exceptional departure from the Christian element he frequently integrates within the Igbo worldview. In fact, between the two stanzas describing his offering to the goddess, the poet inserts a reference to the Messiah. While in 'dim light' he pours 'wine' libations in honour of the mother goddess, he chants:

*Messiah will come again*

*After the argument in heaven*

*Messiah will come again ... (15)*

This moment encapsulates a recurring concern of Okigbo regarding the reconciliation of two belief systems, as the anticipation of the return of the Watermaid is also an expectation of Christ's second coming. This pivotal juncture in *Heavensgate* marks the climax of the poet-protagonist's quest. It represents a suspenseful confrontation and a crucial ceremonial moment where his persistent attempts at creating a synthesis between the two religions finally bear fruit. Only through local ways of worship, it seems, does a resolution occur, enabling the

---

<sup>152</sup> Stella Okoye-Ugwu, p. 6.

poet-protagonist to access the shrine of his unambiguously native muse-goddess – a palm grove that is now also a Christian premise, in which he expects the coming of the awaited Messiah. As the celebrative drums and cannons resound in the palm grove after his offering, his spirit joyfully ascends, marking the manifestation of Okigbo's personal religion through a pentagon imprinted on a palm beam:

THUNDERING drums and cannons

in palm grove:

the spirit is in ascent.

I have visited;

on palm beam imprinted

my pentagon – (16).

In *Heavensgate*, conflict arises as the poet-protagonist, a prodigal, stands before Idoto and appeals to her to admit him into her heavens. This version of 'Idoto in heaven' is a reworking of the mythical code associated with this river goddess in traditional Igbo religious philosophy. It is a fusion of traditional religion and Christianity, through which Okigbo hoped to encode a higher order of spirituality that accommodates his aspirations as a poet with dual religious allegiances. Rising action occurs as the poet-protagonist, a prodigal still, ponders on his past and agrees to liberate himself from the secluding measurements imposed by spiritual and poetic religiosity which, he imagines, locks conformists in strictly regular, four-sided cages. Further action rises as he comes in contact with the Watermaid, who, in further reworking of Idoto, is transformed into a muse that disappears upon unveiling her true nature.

The appearance and disappearance of the Watermaid who embodies the water feminine Igbo essence of the universe coincides with the stars which symbolises the heavenly masculine Christian element, which later manifests in the figure of Messiah. This reiterating interplay climaxes in a context where a unification of the self is achieved and offerings are made, bringing to a resolution that can be felt in the note of elation that concludes the fourth sequence. It is an elation that follows the accomplishment of the quest and the success of the celebrant's rebirth; it is an announcement of the freedom he aspired to, and which he marks by imprinting his own five-sided pentagon of poetry.

The final sequence of *Heavensgate*, titled 'Newcomer', emerges as a post-liminal piece that tests the efficacy of the poet-protagonist's newly embraced worship system. It is 'TIME for worship' and the poet is summoned to this devotional exercise by the tolling of the Christian 'angelus' (17). However, these bells symbolise 'exile' (17) rather than sanctuary for him, which prompts him to implore his personal guardian angel's gentle toll: 'softly sings my guardian angel' (17). Unlike the exiling bells of organised religion, this voice defines his identity and resonates more deeply with his inner conscience. This theme of individuality is further expressed in relation to the local elements of his prayer. Despite seeking Anna's protection for his fragile sanctuary 'sandhouse' (17), he acknowledges that the mask adorning his face is uniquely his own, distinct from the inherited masks of his ancestors: 'Mask over my face – | my own mask, not ancestral – I sign' (17). Okigbo wanted *Heavensgate* to convey the impression that he is involved in 'the shedding of an old skin, of an old mask' as he affirmed in an interview with Van Sertima, validating that the interpretation mirrors his intentions correctly.<sup>153</sup> During the interview, Okigbo clarified that intention was not

---

<sup>153</sup> Chukwuma Azuonye, 'Christopher Okigbo's Intentions', p.11.

necessarily tied to a conscious imposition of an idea on the poem.<sup>154</sup> He explained that he can only describe a poem from his perspective without definitively articulating the intention, thus allowing the work its independent existence.<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, he agreed with Van Sertima's idea that 'intention' refers to 'the central thread that illuminates the work', suggesting a deeper thematic or conceptual coherence rather than a deliberate, imposed message.<sup>156</sup> This sense of intentionalism, according to Okigbo, occurs in *Heavensgate*, given that the poem involves a central figure on a resurrection-like quest, which entails shedding an old mask or self.<sup>157</sup>

Meanwhile, in the final station of his quest, the poet-protagonist is beset with difficulties and fraught; yet he survives:

I AM standing above the noontide,

Above the bridgehead;

Listening to the laughter of waters

that do not know why:

Listening to incense –

I am standing above the noontide

with my head above it;

---

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

Under my feet float the waters

Tide blows them under ... (19)

In this moment, the journey that he embarked on, initially as a bird anxiously perched on one leg, now concludes with him standing confidently on both feet above the noontide and the gently floating water. This moment also signifies the end of Okigbo's reworking journey, which begun with him juxtaposing dispersant element of Igbo and Christian traditions. Here, he rejoicingly listens to the laughter of the Igbo flowing water and the soothing scent of Christian incense, embracing the harmonious convergence of his experiences in both belief systems.

## **Conclusion**

Okigbo, as discussed in this chapter, was exposed to two powerful influences: the Euro-Christian monothetic doctrine, which has a pronounced patriarchal basis, and the traditional Igbo dualistic perception of the world, wherein the mother principle plays a central role. The colonial context in which he was immersed through years of Christian upbringing and education shaped his identity as much as the traditions of Igbo culture passed on to him by his maternal lineage. Okigbo found important connections with the spiritual heritage of the Igbo, especially his association with the water goddess represented by his role as the true reincarnation of Idoto's priests. Yet, perhaps owing to his exposure to another culture, Okigbo chose a different route to continue the long history of the traditional priestly aristocracy of his family, finding in his ancestral philosophy a foundation for his poetic practice rather than a religious one. The postcolonial readings I revisited perceive the existence of the Igbo and the

Christian in *Heavensgate* as incompatible, splitting, and agonizing. As a result, they tend to lean towards confining the implications of the poet's reworking of local materials by overlooking how the addition of Christian imagery and styles can result in a new local material that bears the imprint of the poet's personal experience and contemporary context. The insistence that the two worlds cannot coexist risks perpetuating representations of the colonial and the local in stereotypes or binaries. Likewise, the concern of nativist readings that the poet's juxtaposition of the two different cultures undermines his localism does not quite reflect Okigbo's personal life or ideological tenets in *Heavensgate*. The binary, reductionist reading practices, we have come across in this chapter, did not capture the poem's attempt to emulate Okigbo's cultivation of a personal religion – a religion that is local, if personal. It is rooted first in his ancestral belief system, overlaid with his Catholic experience, and subsequently expanded to convey his existence as a poet.

## Conclusion

This thesis has highlighted the value of local materials in postcolonial poetry and analysed its implications in three collections by twentieth century poets: Arun Kolatkar, Seamus Heaney, and Christopher Okigbo. The three poets, I have argued, incorporated local materials in their poetry not because their cultural specificity isolates it or pits it against colonial elements.

Rather, the local materials are present in the three collections for their mutability and adaptation to intertwine with contemporarily relevant, globally recognised, and universally relatable elements. To write of Kolatkar, Heaney, and Okigbo is an exercise in traversing well-trodden ground; their work has permeated numerous literary discussions, particularly in debates about the extent to which these writers unfavourably departed from their local contexts or audaciously hybridised colonial influences. In this thesis, I have diverged from this beaten path, opting to focus on the lesser explored reworked local materials – emanating from the poets' intimate landscapes, indigenous cultures and obscured histories – and how reworking allows them to signify beyond these immediate contexts. Incorporating the local materials does not inherently restrict the relevance of the literary work, just as integrating it within an interplay of other influences does not necessarily obscure its local character. As Derek Walcott once proclaimed, '[t]he more particular you get, the more universal you become', suggesting that a focus on the local does not limit the resonance of the work.<sup>1</sup> Walcott's dismissal of concerns about the local limiting broader audience appeal underscores how poems rooted in local contexts can still convey a sense of universality.

The thesis has identified the practice of reworking local materials among postcolonial poets as an artistic ethical code, forging a form of stylistic affinity that binds them together. However,

---

<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott, in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. by William Baer, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p. 24.

reworking can take on various forms and work on different scales and contexts. Individual applications of reworking vary depending on individual poetic projects, as inferred from each poet's selection of local materials, how they reframed these materials, and the intended effects aimed at addressing both broader and more specific postcolonial conditions relevant to the poets and their work. This individuality manifests itself in the first place in the structural and thematic framework presented in each of the three collections, which conveys each poet's reworking process. Kolatkar's reworking of bhakti themes and poetics took the form of a pilgrimage. Driven by 'a few questions knocking about in your head', he journeyed through the temple-town Jejuri, which, while cold with rituals, commercially centred, hierarchical and rigid, it retained a quotidian divinity, natural dynamism, and diverse spiritual and societal constituencies. His reworkings recontextualised the medieval bhakti devotion to criticise the Jejuri shrouded in abstract, caste-based religiosity and to espouse a personal approach to its divine, dynamic aspect. While framed within the context of a pilgrimage journey from sunrise to sunset, Kolatkar's reworking of the bhakti did not follow a linear progression. Instead, it engaged in a fluid exchange between different narrative voices and temporal perspectives, capturing the multifaceted reality of contemporary Jejuri.

Heaney's reworking process of the bog myth was similarly nonlinear as he seamlessly shifted between the sacrificial killings of the Jutland and Northern Ireland, blending references from the Iron Age with a mixture of Christological, and national Irish iconographies, among other registers. Yet, unlike Kolatkar, Heaney's approach was a metaphorical 'digging' of sorts, a profound process of excavation that revealed patterns about the violent but artistically evocative rituals associated with the bog and holds embedded meanings that can reinterpret its relevance in contemporary Northern Ireland. His reworkings zoomed in and out of the immediacy of the sectarian conflict, unveiling a long and intertwined history between

Catholics and Protestants beyond inclinations to cast blame or victimhood on any particular faction. Heaney did not blindly align with republicans, dehumanise unionists, or naively accept the coloniser as a friend. Instead, he offered a range of attitudes towards violence, consciously transitioning from empathy to voyeurism to self-criticism, mirroring the dualities and contradictions that he has inherited as Northern Irish. Okigbo's reworking of the Igbo cosmological worldview, on the other hand, followed a linear and gradual trajectory; it emulated the tripartite grammar of a quest aimed at developing a personal religion through poetry, with the state and attitude of the poet-protagonist varying across different stages of the journey. As he refrained from diminishing either traditional Igbo or Christian belief systems or merging them into a hybrid entity, Okigbo began by juxtaposing ostensibly incongruous imageries and references from each paradigm to negotiate the emergence of a new and transcendent synthesis. The culmination of this reworking process opened up a realm of spirituality that allowed the poet-protagonist to access the sanctuary of Idoto which had transformed into a creative spirit.

The reworking strategy of the poets considered in this thesis highlights poetry as a genre distinct from other forms of discourse such as history, journalism, politics, and religion. Poets, I have argued, are artistically autonomous and can experiment with local materials to generate new ones in which the local bears the imprint of engagement with the contemporary, modern, and global. The three poets I have studied demonstrate attentiveness to the resonances and potentials of local materials for their contemporary contexts and subject matters. Their commitment to an artistic project, I have suggested, made them even more authoritative voices on local contexts than those espousing narrow perspectives. This is because, instead of retreating into static, exclusionary, and dogmatic worldviews, each of the three poets imagined a different vision of the world that, while vividly depicting everyday customs,

religious rituals, social codes, and historical and mythological references that spring from Maharashtra, Mossbawn, and Ojoto, maintained an open posture and dialogue with a wider network of literary, political, spiritual connections, to name a few. Unfortunately, this openness has been demoralising for certain readers, for whom the poets' reworkings of local materials appeared to be distortive and misrepresentative.

Kolatkar's poetic world was not restrained by a chronological and homogeneous construction of history. He viewed history as 'ambiguous', 'fluid', a 'floating situation' and an enduring 'nagging quest'.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, while the medieval bhakti spiritual and literary discourse predates Kolatkar's modernity in its anti-establishment stance, individualism, and heterodoxy, Kolatkar never aimed at restoring it to its historical state. Kolarkar did not imitate or rewrite poems of the bhakti saint-poets who influenced him. Instead, his narrative structure was fluid and fostered a subjective experience and interpretation of the history of India as a land of wide-ranging spiritual, linguistic, and literary traditions. Kolatkar did not adhere to what a constructed historical narrative might perpetuate as rigid dichotomies. Categories such as 'Eastern' and 'Western', 'Asian' and 'European', local and foreign, traditional and modern, were, for him, transitional and could intertwine. He, therefore, freely invoked the bhakti spirit in an English poem and employed techniques and registers that are recognisably modern both in the sense of time and literary movement. He, for instance, conveyed a bhakti-based recognition of the divinity of a doorstep within an Imagist poem. Kolatkar's devotional vision also updated the referential field of medieval bhakti. He added smoking as a spiritually-enlightening act, modern transportations as routes to spiritual transformation, the cross as a symbol of unnecessary physical pain for salvation, the trope of 'a dangling martyr', and a

---

<sup>2</sup> Kolatkar in Eunice De Souza, *Talking Poems: Conversations with Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 19.

metaphor from an anatomy book, among other things. These additions are not alienating nor subversive to traditional bhakti; for bhakti is individualist and responsive to the poets' broader social and political context. They, nonetheless, are markers of Kolatkar's reworkings which allow him to put bhakti and modern influences in dialogue, forming a single continuous lineage of his own. They, also, are naturally against nativist expectations of a poetic narrative that participates in an Indian Hindu essence, brahman in nature and Marathi in language.

Heaney, on the other hand, approached the bog for its liminal qualities in presenting both sides of the binary, the colonised and coloniser, so as to transcend narrow conceptions of geographical spaces, historical epochs, and political and artistic positions. Heaney's bog symbol was not just an alternative aesthetic response to overt political rhetoric during the Troubles. Laden with themes of disturbing violence and artistry, it was a symbol suggestive both aesthetically and politically. Therefore, it enabled Heaney to imagine a world that counterbalanced tribal extremism which ruthlessly condemned the Irish sisters who formed bonds with British soldiers, on the one hand, and civilised outrage, which, on the other hand, presented a condescending attitude towards such instances. Heaney's poetic world also negotiated both the tribal reverence for the severed head of the bog girl and the insensitivity of documentation that may inadvertently romanticise her plight; both perspectives risk overlooking her tragic fate. Heaney clarified that it is not enough for him to merely retell violent events; this required 'some kind of analogy. I'd find images'.<sup>3</sup> He recognised that poetry, when confronted with challenging political and social contexts such as the Troubles, needed to rise to the occasion and reflect the intricate reality that surrounded it. Through

---

<sup>3</sup> Eavan Boland, 'The Northern Writer's Crisis of Conscience', Part 1 of 3: 'Community', *Irish Times* (12 August 1970), p. 12, cited in Chris Morash 'Legacy', in *Seamus Heaney in Context* ed. by Higgins, Geraldine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 315–356.

poetry, the bog became a space for Heaney to convey subjective experiences and emotional depths that are often sidelined in political or journalistic expressions.

Okigbo challenged religious dogma through his poetry, juxtaposing the watery, feminine presence of Idoto in Igbo cosmology with the Christian focus on the transcendental Father God. Despite apparent contradictions, Okigbo's world viewed these spiritual sources as complementary, and juxtaposing them was in line with the Igbo worldview that emphasised cosmic equilibrium as a collaboration between male and female principles. Okigbo reworked the Igbo pantheon to include a non-ancestral deity, rather than narrowing his spiritual and artistic expression to, for instance, writing poems that pit Idoto against the Christian Father. His unique synthesis, termed as 'personal religion', went beyond intertwining the local and colonial contexts. He reinterpreted the traditional to suit the contemporary demands of his experience, envisioning established religious deities as sources of poetic inspiration. Indeed, this reinterpretation pits the subjective meaning-making of the poetic practice against the limitations of religiosity, leading to dissatisfaction among readers who may struggle to reconcile their religious beliefs with Okigbo's artistic vision.

While I have argued that the three poets engage in these reworkings to defamiliarize and recreate the local to suit personal purposes, this does not mean that these purposes are exclusive to the private sphere; the personal is capable of interweaving with broader, collective, public, or universal dimensions. Kolatkar's internalisation of the bhakti spirit in *Jejuri* reflects a personal desire to 'reclaim everything I consider my tradition'.<sup>4</sup> However, Kolatkar's pilgrimage invites a communal reimaging of traditions through its second-person address, effecting a broader nonessentialist narrative of India. By contrast, Heaney's personal

---

<sup>4</sup> Kolatkar in Eunice De Souza, p. 19.

search for the symbolic poetic expression the bog afforded signifies a tension between personal autonomy and public pressures for a more communal response. “If I do write something, | Whatever it is, I’ll be writing for myself”, Heaney once responded to a republican who demanded that Heaney write something for the Irish cause.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Heaney’s intimate voice is not isolated from the broader public stage upon which his poetry was presented. As O’Driscoll rightly points out, Heaney ‘continued speaking for himself – a private poet with a public platform, a public poet whose utterances were tested against private experience’.<sup>6</sup> Of course, as poetry has a capacity to endure across time and space and to resonate with audiences in diverse cultural and historical contexts beyond immediate context of The Troubles, Heaney also contributes to a more universal conversation about human suffering and resilience in the face of violence. Okigbo, similar to Heaney, perceived poetry as a conduit to channel private experiences, albeit religious not political: ‘the way that I worship my gods is in fact through poetry’, Okigbo once commented.<sup>7</sup> He, therefore, embarked on a quest aimed at developing a personal religion through poetry. Okigbo’s quest affords a collective quality of a mass, where the poem can become representative of a ‘quest for self-fulfilment by a nation, … Africa’,<sup>8</sup> as well as a universal ‘fable of man’s perennial quest for fulfilment’.<sup>9</sup>

In using a lens that focuses on the ‘local element’, I hope to encourage readers of postcolonial or world poetry to sharpen their eyes for the subtleties of its reworkings and move beyond

---

<sup>5</sup> qtd in Dennis O’Driscoll, ‘Heaney in Public’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, edited by Bernard O’Donoghue (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008), p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Okigbo in Marjory Whitelaw, “Interview with Christopher Okigbo, 1965,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1970), p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Chukwuma Azuonye, ‘Christopher Okigbo’s Intentions: A Critical Edition of a Previously Unpublished Interview by Ivan van Sertima’, *Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series* (2011), p. 11, <[https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana\\_faculty\\_pubs/6](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs/6)> [accessed 4 March 2024].

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Okigbo, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (Heinemann: London, 1971), p. .8.

presuming inherent value in its precedence or distinctiveness from other influences. Such an approach can enable a better understanding of how writers perceive the world, themselves, and the cultural dynamics that underpin their postcolonial experiences, irrespective of whether their backgrounds align with or differ from the reader's experience, location, or worldview. Derek Walcott's *Sea Grapes* (1976) offers an intriguing example for a future case study to examine the payoffs of reworking local materials. 'Mass Man', a poem in the collection, illustrates Walcott's engagement in a reworking process. Evoking the vibrant spectacle of a local carnival, he explores the role of the artist within a culture that fails to think back and retrospect; part of the function of the poet in the present, therefore, involves 'the responsibility of howling in your dust, of crawling and recollecting your rubbish, and, ultimately, of writing your poems'.<sup>10</sup>

In 'Mass Man', Walcott presents a reflective account in the 'penitential morning' that follows the local carnival, which he seems to disdain due to the trivialisation of ancient and meaningful rituals for the sake of mere amusement and enjoyment: 'Join us, they shout, | 'O God, child, you can't dance? | But somewhere in that whirlwind's radiance | a child, rigged like a bat, collapses, sobbing' (31). The speaker, moreover, grapples with the masks worn during these rituals, such as the lion's head and the gold-wired peacock, which simultaneously conceal and reveal the painful history of slavery. The speaker acknowledges the enduring resonance of these histories in the present, for 'I am dancing, look, from an old gibbet | my bull-whipped body swings, a metronome! | Like a fruit-bat dropped in the silk-cotton's shade, | my mania, my mania is a terrible calm' (31). Nonetheless, the speaker is aware of a certain affinity between carnival as a celebration of creole invention, and his own creative process. This affinity is apparent in the poem through the employment of imagery

---

<sup>10</sup> Derek Walcott, 'Mass Man', in *Sea Grapes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 31.

that ranges from the indigenous fruit-bat dropping in the silk-cotton's shade, the African 'lions' and a Cleopatra-like peacock mask, to the religious metaphor of the Mass. Walcott's reconfiguration of these seemingly disparate elements into a cohesive poem suggests his purpose to address the painful legacies of the past while illuminating the inventiveness of Caribbean identity.

There are several examples of poems that demonstrate in potent language and poetic form the potential of the local element to engage in dialogue with other elements, offering us access to experiences that may resonate with our own or broaden our horizons to unfamiliar realms.

The Indian poet A. K. Ramanujan reinvents the Hindu concept of reincarnation in his poem 'Elements of Composition', prompting us to reimagine ourselves not as discrete neoliberal individuals but as interwoven collectives, characterised by permeable, fluid, and provisional boundaries. These collectives navigate an ongoing cycle of life, death, and rebirth, making us feel as if we occupy disparate corporeal vessels within alternate spatial realms, 'into other names and forms, | past and passing, tenses | without time, | caterpillar on a leaf, eating, | being eaten'.<sup>11</sup> Lorna Goodison transitions from depicting the Jamaican heroine in her dramatic monologue 'Nanny' as confined by a national image of a resisting maternal figure, with a sealed womb symbolising a state where nothing should enter nor leave,<sup>12</sup> to crafting a vibrant multicultural portrayal of her assuming different female guises, ranging from Caribbean Mother Goddesses like Yemanja to the multi-breasted Diana of Ephesus and a Dogon deity, as depicted in poems across *Supplying Salt and Light* (2013). Whereas 'Ghazal' by Agha Shahid Ali carries out an existential religious drama where a 'refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight' ultimately encounters divine connection and vulnerability, encapsulated

---

<sup>11</sup> A. K. Ramanujan, *Selected Poems* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Lorna Goodison, *Selected Poems*. (USA: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 69.

in the rejoicing declaration: ‘And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee – | God sobs in my arms’.<sup>13</sup> Ali conveys feelings of spiritual imprisonment, quest for redemption, devotion to God, and spiritual apostasy through a collaborative use of the ghazal’s rhythmic regularity, the informal address common to Sufis, the symbolism of biblical figures like Elijah and Jezebel, and echoes from Melville’s *Moby Dick*.

The wide range of local materials reworked by postcolonial poets in response to the modern, globalising contexts of the twentieth century deserves closer attention. This thesis has taken a step towards this endeavour by illuminating examples of poets benefiting from the dynamism of local materials and their ability to fit contemporary exigencies and intertwine with modern and global elements. I have sought to provide evidence that, through reworkings, poets stay informed but not constrained by the past, local but not exclusionary, and are political, artistic, and even spiritual in their own right.

---

<sup>13</sup> Agha Shahid Ali, ‘Ghazal’ in *The Country Without a Post* (New York: Norton, 1997). Electronic source.

## Bibliography

Agbasiere, Joseph Therese, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, (New York: Routledge, 2000)

Ahmad, Aijaz, *Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, (London: Verso, 1992)

Ali, Agha Shahid, *The Country Without a Post* (New York: Norton, 1997)

Allison, Jonathan, 'Politics', in *Seamus Heaney in Context*, ed. by Geraldine Higgins (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2021)

Anozie, O. Sunday, *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric*, (London: Evans Bros, 1972)

\_\_\_\_\_, 'Okigbo's *Heavensgate*: a Study of Art as Ritual,' in *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*, ed. by Donatus Ibe Nwoga (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984)

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back, 2nd ed*, (London: Routledge, 2002)

Azuonye, Chukwuma, 'Christopher Okigbo's Intentions: A Critical Edition of a Previously Unpublished Interview by Ivan van Sertima', *Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series* (2011), <[https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana\\_faculty\\_pubs/6](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs/6)> [accessed 4 March 2024]

Bahri, Deepika, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003)

Basden, G.T, *Among the Ibos of Southern Nigeria*, (London: Frank Cass, 1966)

Beecroft, Alexander, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London: Verso, 2015)

Best, Curwen, *Kamau Brathwaite and Christopher Okigbo: Art, Politics, and the Music of Ritual*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009)

Bird, Emma, 'Re-reading Postcolonial Poetry: Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47:2 (2012), 229-243, doi:10.1177/0021989412446018

Boehmer, Elleke, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

\_\_\_\_\_, *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-century Critical Readings*, (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Bouglé, Célestin Charles Alfred, *Essays on the Caste System*, tran. by David Francis Pocock, (Cambridge: University Press, 1971), <<https://archive.org/details/essaysoncastesys0000boug>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Bourlet, Mélanie, 'Cosmopolitanism, Literary Nationalisms and Linguistic Activism: A Multi-local Perspective on Pulaar', *Journal of World Literature* 4:1 (2019), 35-55, doi.org/10.1163/24056480-00401004

Brandes, Rand, 'Seamus Heaney's Working Titles: From 'Advancements of Learning' to 'Midnight Anvil'', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Bronkhorst, Johannes, *How the Brahmins Won: From Alexander to the Guptas* (Leiden: Brill, 2016)

Burrow, Thomas, 'The Early Aryans', in *Cultural History of India*, ed. by A.L. Basham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975)

Carson, Ciaran, 'Escaped from the Massacre?' in *A Twentieth-century Literature Reader: Texts and Debates*, ed. by Suman Gupta and David Johnson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005)

Chandra, Sudhir, 'Translations and the Making of Colonial Indian Consciousness', *Pratilipi*, 13 (2008), <<https://pratilipi.in/2008/12/translations-and-the-making-of-colonial-indian-consciousness-sudhir-chandra>> [accessed 11 September 2024]

Chaudhuri, Amit, *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature, and Culture* (Oxford, England: Peter Lang, 2008)

\_\_\_\_\_, 'Pilgrims' progress', *The Guardian*, 21 Oct 2006, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/oct/21/featuresreviews.guardianreview32>> [accessed 6 March 2024]

Chaudhuri, Rosinka, *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere* (Bern; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014)

Chindhade, Shirish, *Five Indian English Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, R. Parthasarathy* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 1996)

Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980)

Clark, John Pepper, 'Poetry in Africa Today', *Transition* 18 (1965), 20-26, doi:10.2307/2934834

Cleary, J, 'Postcolonial Writing in Ireland', in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, ed. by A, Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

\_\_\_\_\_, 'Postcolonial Ireland', in Kevin Kenny (ed.), *Ireland and the British Empire, Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; online edn, Oxford Academic, 3 Oct. 2011),  
doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199251841.003.0009.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome and Lowell Duckert (eds), *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015)

Coogan, Tim Pat, *The IRA: A History* (Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1993)  
<https://archive.org/details/irahistory00coog> [accessed 2 August 2024]

Coughlan, Patricia, 'Bog Queens: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney', in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Michael Allen (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1997)

Creedon-Carey, Una A, 'The Whole Vexed Question: Seamus Heaney, Old English, and Language Troubles', (Oberlin College: Digital Commons at Oberlin, 2015),  
<<https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/257>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Cullingford, Elizabeth Butler, 'British Romans and Irish Carthaginians: Anticolonial Metaphor in Heaney, Friel, and McGuinness', *PMLA*, 111 (1996), 222-239,  
doi:10.2307/463103

Dalrymple, William, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2006)

De Souza, Eunice, *Talking Poems: Conversations with Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999)

Devy, Ganesh N, *In Another Tongue: Essays on Indian English Literature*, (Madras: Macmillan, 1993)

Dubey, Ashutosh, 'A Critical Appraisal of Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*', in *Indian Poetry in English: Critical Essays*, ed. by Zinia Mitra, (Delhi: Prentice Hall India Learning Private Limited, 2016)

Dumont, Louis, *Homo Hierarchicus; The Caste System and its Implications*, trans. by Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont, and Baisia Gulati (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), <<https://archive.org/details/homohierarchicus00dumorich>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Echeruo, Michael J.C, 'Christopher Okigbo, Poetry Magazine, and the 'Lament of the Silent Sisters'', *Research in African Literatures* 35:3 (2004), 8-25, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3821291>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Edward W, Said, Eagleton, Terry, and Fredric Jameson, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990)

Egudu, R, N, 'Defence of culture in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo', *African Literature Today*, 6 (1973)

Elam, J, Daniel, 'The Form of Global Anglo-phone Literature is Grenfell Tower', Post45: Contemporaries, (2019) <<https://post45.org/2019/02/the-form-of-global-anglophone-literature-is-grenfell-tower/>> [accessed 6 March 2024]

Etherington, Ben, and Jarad Zimbler, 'Decolonize Practical Criticism?' *English: Journal of the English Association* 70: 270 (2021), 227-236, doi:10.1093/english/efab017

\_\_\_\_\_, 'Field, Material, Technique: On Renewing Postcolonial Literary Criticism', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 49:3 (2014), 279-297, doi:10.1177/0021989414538435

Fennell, Desmond, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No 1*, (Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991)

Fraser, J, Nelson, and James F, Edwards, *The Life and Teaching of Tukaram*, (Delhi: The Christian Literature Society for India, 1922),

<<https://archive.org/details/LifeAndTeachingsOfTukaram>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Fraser, Robert, 'The Achievement of Christopher Okigbo', in *West African Poetry: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)

Fuller, C, J, 'Gods, Priests and Purity: On the Relation Between Hinduism and the Caste System.' *Man*, 14:3, 1979, 459-476, doi:10.2307/2801869

Ganguly, Debjani, 'Angloglobalism, Multilingualism and World Literature', *Interventions* 25:5 (2023), 601-618, doi:10.1080/1369801X.2023.2175418

Gbule, N, J., and Nwaka, C, S, 'The Persistence of Igbo Worldview in the Sabbath Church Healing Liturgy and Praxis'. *Mission Studies* 38:2 (2021), doi:10.1163/15733831-12341792

Gennep, Arnold van, *Les Rites de Ppassage* (1909), trans. *The Rites of Passage* by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960)

Gibbons, Luke, 'Unapproved Roads, Ireland and Post-Colonial Identity', in *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts Volume II*, ed, by Diana Brydon, (London: Routledge, 2004)

Glob, P. V., *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved*, trans, by Rupert Bruce-Mitford, (London: Faber and Faber, 1969),

<[https://archive.org/details/bogpeopleironage00glob\(mode/1up?view=theater](https://archive.org/details/bogpeopleironage00glob(mode/1up?view=theater)> [accessed 4 March 2024]. Graham, Colin, and R, Kirkland, eds, *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity*, (London: Macmillan, 1999)

Graham, Colin, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001)

Goodison, Lorna, *Selected Poems*. (USA: University of Michigan Press, 1992)

Haffenden, John, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1981)

Hansen, Thomas, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999)

Hart, Henry, 'History, Myth, and Apocalypse in Seamus Heaney's *North*.' *Contemporary Literature* 30:3 (1989), doi:10.2307/1208411

\_\_\_\_\_, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992)

Hawley, John Stratton, 'Author and Authority in the Bhakti Poetry of North India', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 47:2 (1988), doi:10.2307/2056168

Heaney, Seamus, and Karl Miller, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller*, (London: BTL, 2000).

Heaney, Seamus, *North*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1975)

\_\_\_\_\_, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1980)

\_\_\_\_\_, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2002)

\_\_\_\_\_, *An Open Letter*, (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1983)

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Redress of Poetry: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings (Oxford lectures)*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1995)

\_\_\_\_\_, 'Letters to the Editor', *Irish Times* (3 September 1983)

\_\_\_\_\_, 'Anglo-Irish Occasions', *London Review of Books* (5 May 1988)

<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v10/n09/seamus-heaney/anglo-irish-occasions>> [accessed 4 August 2024]

\_\_\_\_\_, *New Selected Poems, 1966-1987* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 17,  
<<https://archive.org/details/newselectedpoems0000hean>> [accessed 22 September 2024]

Heffernan, Thomas Farel, *Wood Quay: The Clash Over Dublin's Viking Past*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988)

Hena, Omaar, 'Globalization and Postcolonial Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, ed. by Jahan Ramazani, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

Hooper, Glenn, and Colin Graham, eds, *Irish and Postcolonial Writing: History, Theory, Practice*, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2002)

Howe, Stephen, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford, 2002; online, Oxford Academic, 3 Oct. 2011),  
doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199249909.001.0001

Ikwuagwu, Onwumere A, *Initiation in African Traditional Religion: A Systematic Symbolic Analysis, with Special Reference to Aspects of Igbo Religion in Nigeria*, (Würzburg, 2007),  
<<https://d-nb.info/982179243/34>> {accessed 8 March 2024}

Isichei, Elizabeth Allo, *A History of the Igbo People*, (London: Macmillan, 1976).

Iweadighi, Sabinus Okechukwu, 'Sickness and the Search for Healing in Igboland', PhD thesis, 2011, <<https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:163025850>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Iyer, Bharat, 'An Interview with Arvind Krishna Mehrotra', *Eclectica* 17.1 (Jan/Feb 2013) <<https://www.eclectica.org/v17n1/iyer.html>> [accessed 10 September 2024]

Izevbaye, Dan, "Living the myth: revisiting Okigbo's art and commitment." *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde* 48:1 (2011), doi:10.4314/tvl.v48i1.63817

Kalliney J. Peter, *The Aesthetic Cold War: Decolonization and Global Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022)

Kiberd, Declan, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, (London: Vintage, 1996)

King, Bruce, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987)

Kolatkar, Arun, *Collected Poems in English*, ed. by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, (Tarsit, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2010)

Kraemer, Christine Hoff, 'Channelling the Great Mother: Gender Dualism in Heaney's 'Bog Queen'', (2003), <<http://www.christinehoffkraemer.com/bogqueen.html>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Lewis, Pericles, *The Waste Land, Modernism Lab* (Yale University), <<https://campuspress.yale.edu/modernismlab/the-waste-land/>> [accessed 17 October 2024].

Lloyd, David, '“Pap for the Dispossess’d’: Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity’, *Boundary 2*, 13.2/3 (1985), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/303105>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

Lloyd, David, ‘Review Article: Seamus Heaney’s “Field Work”, *Ariel*, 12.2 (1981), <<https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ariel/article/view/32571>> [accessed 4 August 2024]

Longley, Edna, ‘“North”: ‘Inner Emigré’ or ‘Artful Voyeur’?’ in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Tony Curtis, 2nd edn (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1985)

MacKillop, James, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198609674.001.0001/acref-9780198609674>> [accessed 4 March 2024]

Mani, Braj Ranjan, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2005), <<https://archive.org/details/debrahmanisinghi0000braj>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

McClintock, Anne, ‘The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’’, *Social Text*, no. 31/32 (1992), doi:10.2307/466219

McConnell, Gail, ‘Heaney and the Photograph: “Strange Fruit” in Manuscript and Published Form’, *Irish University Review*, 47 (2017), 432–49 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26537695>> [accessed 1 August 2024]

M.G., Hari and H.S., Komalesha, ‘Sacred without God: Bhakti in the Poetry of Arun Kolatkar’, *Asiatic*, 8:2 (2014), doi:10.31436/asiatic.v8i2.494

Molino, Michael R., ‘Flying by the Nets of Language and Nationality: Seamus Heaney, the ‘English’ Language, and Ulster’s Troubles’, *Modern Philology*, 91:2 (1993), p. 181, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/438827> [accessed 1 July 2024]

Moody, T, W, 'Introduction: Early Modern Ireland', in *A New History of Ireland: Early Modern Ireland 1534-1691*, (Oxford, 2009, Online, Oxford Academic, 3 Oct, 2011), doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199562527.003.0024

Morford, Mark P. O., and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 7th edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)

Morrison, Blake, *Seamus Heaney*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993)

Mufti, Aamir R, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018)

Naik, Madhukar K., *Dimensions of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1984)

Nemade, Balachandra, 'Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Poetry', in *Indian Readings in Commonwealth Literature* ed. by G, S, Amur (New Delhi: Sterling, 1985)

Nerlekar, Anjali, *Bombay Modern: Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Literary Culture*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016)

Nwakanma, Obi, 'Okigbo Agonistes: Postcolonial Subjectivity in 'Limits' and 'Distances'', *Matatu*, 33:1 (2006), 327-338, doi:10.1163/18757421-033001037

\_\_\_\_\_, *Christopher Okigbo 1930-67: Thirsting for Sunlight*, (Boydell and Brewer, 2010)

Nwoga, Donatus Ibe, 'Christopher Okigbo: The Man and the Poet', in *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*, ed. by Donatus Ibe Nwoga, (Washington: Three Continents, 1984)

Nwoye, Chinwe M, A, 'Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview: An Insider's Perspective', *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 3:9 (2011), <<https://dokumen.tips/documents/igbo-cultural-and-religious-worldview-in-nigeria-the-hausa-and-the-yoruba.html?page=1>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

O'Donoghue, Heather, 'Heaney, Beowulf and the Medieval Literature of the North', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Bernard O'Donoghue, 47-62, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

O'Driscoll, Dennis, 'Heaney in Public', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. by Bernard O'Donoghue, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

\_\_\_\_\_, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, (London: Faber, 2009)

Okigbo, Christopher, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*, (Heinemann: London, 1971)

Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. by Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955)

*Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, June 2024)

doi.org/10.1093/OED/1114888220, [accessed 1 October 2024].

Maik Nwosu, 'Christopher Okigbo and the Postcolonial Market of Memories', *Research in African Literatures*, 38:4, (2007), 70-86, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20109539>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna, 'Introduction' in *Songs of Kabir*, trans. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, preface by Wendy Doniger (New York: New York Review Books, 2011)

\_\_\_\_\_, (ed.), *A History of Indian Literature in English* (London: Hurst, 2003)

Omvedt, Gail, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011)

Orsini, Francesca, 'World Literature, Indian Views, 1920s–1940s', *Journal of World Literature* 4:1 (2019), 56-81, doi:10.1163/24056480-00401002

Orsini, Francesca, and Laetitia Zecchini, 'The Locations of (World) Literature: Perspectives from Africa and South Asia: Introduction', *Journal of World Literature* 4:1 (2019), 1-12, doi:10.1163/24056480-00401003

Parker, Michael, *Seamus Heaney: the Making of the Poet*, (London: Macmillan, 1994)

Pollock, Sheldon, 'Indian', in *How Literatures Begin: A Global History*, ed. Joel B. Lande and Denis Feeney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021)

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006)

Prentiss, Karen Pechilis, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), <<https://archive.org/details/embodimentofbhak0000pech>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Raghavan, V., *The Great Integrators: The Saint-Singers of India* (New Delhi: Publications Div., Government of India, 1966)

Raj, Rizio, 'Kala Ghoda Poems Arun Kolatkar: Book review', *Indian Literature* 48:5 (223) (2004): 37-42, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23346471>> [accessed 6 March 2024]

Ramanujan, A, K, *The Collected Essays of A, K, Ramanujan*, ed. by Vinay Dharwadker, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999)

Ramanujan, A. K., *Selected Poems* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976)

Ramazani, Jahan, 'Poetry and Postcolonialism', in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, ed. by Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

\_\_\_\_\_, 'The Wound of History: Walcott's *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction', *PMLA*, 112:3, (1997), doi:10.2307/462949

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001)

\_\_\_\_\_, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014)

\_\_\_\_\_, *A Transnational Poetics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019)

\_\_\_\_\_, *Poetry in a Global Age*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020)

Ravinthiran, V, 'Arun Kolatkar's Description of India', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 49.3 (2014), doi:10.1177/0021989414533691

Raykar, Shubhangi, ed, *Jejuri: A Commentary and Critical Perspectives*, (Pune: Prachet, 1995)

Ross, Anne, *Everyday Life of the Pagan Celts*, (London: Botsford, 1970)

Sawant, V, Pradnya, 'Representation of Religion in Kolatkar's *Jejuri*', *Journal of Higher Education and Research*, (2013)

Schelling, Andrew, *The Oxford Anthology of Bhakti Literature*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Serumaga, Robert, 'Interviewing Christopher Okigbo', London, July 1965, an extract in *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*, ed. by Donatus Ibe Nwoga (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984)

Siollun, Max, *What Britain Did to Nigeria: A Short History of Conquest and Rule*, (London Hurst publishers, 2021)

Sirr, Peter, ““IN STEP WITH WHAT ESCAPED ME”: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney”, *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 98 (2009), 9–27 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40649068>> [accessed 19 October 2024]

Smith, Brian K, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)

Sontheimer, Gunther-Dietz, Ann Feldhaus, Aditya Malik and Heidrun Bruckner, eds *King of Hunters, Warriors, and Shepherds: Essays on Kandhoba* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1997)

Spencer, Robert, and Anastasia Valassopoulos, *Postcolonial Locations: New Issues and Directions in Postcolonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 2020)

Stella, Okoye-Ugwu, and Oliver Nyambi (Reviewing editor), ‘Beyond the Limits of the Dream: Delineating the Mythic and Ritual Sequence in Okigbo’s Poetry’, *Cogent Arts and Humanities*, 8:1, 2021, doi:10.1080/23311983.2021.1882070

Suhr-Sytsma, N, *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

Tacitus, P, Cornelius, *Tacitus on Britain and Germany: A Translation of the Agricola and the Germania*, trans. and introduced by H, Mattingly (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948)

Terada, Yoshitaka, “Temple Music Traditions in Hindu South India: ‘Periya Mēlam’ and its Performance Practice.” *Asian Music*, 39:2, (2008), 108–151,  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501587>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

*The Holy Bible, King James Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), Ps. 130  
<<https://www.bible.com/bible/1/PSA.130.KJV>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Tukaram, *The Poems of Tukārāma, trans. and Re-arranged, with Notes and an Introduction* by J, Nelson Fraser and K, B, Marathe, Volume 2 (Delhi: The Christian Literature Society, 1913), <<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.202538>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Poems of Tukārāma, trans. and Re-arranged, with Notes and an Introduction*, by J, Nelson Fraser and K, B, Marathe, Volume 3 (Delhi: The Christian Literature Society, 1915), <<https://archive.org/details/poemstukrma00maragoog/page/n11/mode/2up>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Udeani, Chibueze C, *Inculturation as Dialogue: Igbo Culture and the Message of Christ*, (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2007)

Udechukwu, Obiora. ‘Aesthetics and the Mythic Imagination: Notes on Christopher Okigbo’s *Heavensgate* and Uche Okeke’s Drawings’, in *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*, ed. by Donatus Ibe Nwoga (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984)

Udoeyop, N.J., ‘A Branch of Giant Fennel’, in *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo*, ed. by Donatus Ibe Nwoga (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984)

Uzukwu, E, Elochukwu, ‘Igbo World and Ultimate Reality and Meaning’, *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 5:3 (1982), doi:10.3138/uram.5.3.188

Velassery, Sebastian, *Casteism and Human Rights: Toward an Ontology of the Social Order*, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005)

Vendler, Helen, *Seamus Heaney*, (London: HarperCollins, 1998)

Walcott Derek, *Sea Grapes*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976)

\_\_\_\_\_, *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. by William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996)

Westall, Claire 'World-Literary Resources and Energetic Materialism', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53.3 (2017), 265–276, [doi:10.1080/17449855.2017.1337671](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2017.1337671)

Whitelaw, Marjory, 'Interview with Christopher Okigbo, 1965', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 5:1 (1970)

Yeats, W. B., *The Collected Works*, vol. v: *Later Essays*, ed. William H. O'Donnell (New York: Macmillan, 1994)

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Wordsworth Editions, 2000)

Yesufu, Abdul R, 'Ritual and the Quest for Selfhood in Okigbo's Labyrinths and Brathwaite's Masks', *Neohelicon* (2011), doi:10.1023/A:1011921726365

Young, Robert J, C, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001)

Zecchini, Laetitia, 'Contemporary Bhakti Recastings: Recovering a Demotic Tradition, Challenging Nativism, Fashioning Modernism in Indian Poetry', *Interventions*, 16:2 (2014), 257-276, doi:10.1080/1369801X.2013.798128

\_\_\_\_\_, ‘Dharma Reconsidered: The Inappropriate Poetry of Arun Kolatkar in *Sarpa Satra*’, in *Religion in Literature and Film in South Asia*, ed. by Daniela Dimitrova, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

\_\_\_\_\_, ‘Practices, Constructions and Deconstructions of ‘World Literature’ and ‘Indian Literature’ from the PEN All-India Centre to Arvind Krishna Mehrotra’, *Journal of World Literature* 4:1 (2019), 82-106, doi:10.1163/24056480-00401005

\_\_\_\_\_, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014)

\_\_\_\_\_, ‘Strangeness and Historicity against Nativism: Blurring the Frontiers of the Nation in Arun Kolatkar’s Poetry’, *Orientalia Suecana* (2012), 60–70  
<<https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-177287>> [accessed 8 March 2024]

Zimbler, Jarad and Rachel Bower, ‘On the Making of African Literatures’, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 49.3 (2020), 193–211, doi:10.1093/camqly/bfaa020 [accessed 2 October 2024].