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## The Bombay Boys of Mira Nair, Firdaus Kanga and Ardashir Vakil

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The valorization of traditional sources that has come to be termed nativism has a broad politics that can distort the historical record by romanticizing the past. When Léopold Senghor or Amilcar Cabral speak of a "national culture"<sup>1</sup> as the source for post-independence development and Frantz Fanon warns against the exoticization of "native"<sup>2</sup> culture, the contours of the argument seem to be obvious: critics in one camp seek first to counter colonial cultural dominance; critics in the other camp wish to temper such rejection with a "domestication" of European culture. Westerners, even well-meaning ones, can get caught in related entanglements when engaged in the representation of other cultures. Thus, building on the work of Bronislaw Malinowski, filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha notes ironically that "language is a means through which an interpreter arrives at the rank of a scientist" (74). Quote the "native," she seems to be saying, and the researcher can become a successful ventriloquist for this or that theory—and a tenured one, at that.

Whether consciously chosen for this reason or not, some filmmakers and novelists use young, artless narrators as a nod in the direction of Minh-ha's implied criticism of the *faux* objectivity of some anthropological researchers.<sup>3</sup> While it is true that documentary filmmakers edit their subjects' words, and novelists make them up from whole cloth, verisimilitude (to the extent that it still shapes characterization in contemporary fiction) demands an innocence in young narrators and protagonists that simply cannot define adult characters except in studies of mental defect

(consider, in this regard, Lars von Trier's<sup>4</sup> 1996 *Breaking the Waves* or Alain Chevalier's 1986 *Thérèse*<sup>5</sup>). The choice of a young consciousness tempers the distorted representation of adults, and so the argument goes: adults ("native" or otherwise) have a vested interest in a certain politics of narration in their presentation of the world to the viewer or reader. On the other hand, the devil's advocate would argue that "innocence" is not present in streetwise children in a semi-documentary film or in *any* adult-imagined child's consciousness in a novel. Consider, for example, José Louzeiro's *Childhood of the Dead* (1977) and Hector Babenco's startling film, *Pixote* (1981), based on Louzeiro's novel: when the cameras roll, the acting begins. Consider William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) or Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1962): when pen is put to paper, a fabrication unfolds that is an adult's impersonation of childish consciousness. In fact, questions of authenticity of voice cannot be avoided even in works that do attempt to keep their narrators relatively insulated from the politics around them. After all, the conversation into which each of us enters in life has been going on for some time: Peter Sellers is hilarious in the filmed version of Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There* (1983) principally because of the absurdity of the notion of a true *tabula rasa*. Trinh Minh-ha quotes Roland Barthes to the effect that "there is no reality not already classified by men: to be born is nothing but to find this code ready-made and to be obligated to accommodate oneself to it" (52).

But knowing all this, how may the choice of a wide-eyed male child in Bombay nonetheless enable the writer/cinematographer to intervene far more knowingly in ongoing "adult" debates about such topics as nativism and, behind the scenes, the cosmopolitanism that seems necessary for the successful production of books and films in a globalized society? Nativism and cosmopolitanism may play a role in shaping the futures of these young narrators. As Roland Barthes suggests: they have shaped their present, but they are not topics that enter their consciousnesses except as children move beyond the innocence that makes them compelling as narrators (cited in Trinh Minh-ha 143). An answer, I will contend, may suggest itself from an analysis of the topics themselves, topics that ask, on the one hand, for an examination of the "childhood" of a culture and, on the other

hand, for an examination of the alienating and corrupting effects of maturity. In both cases, the author is expressing: (1) a nostalgia for what has been lost in him/herself and in the nation; (2) a challenge to those who may too easily rank themselves among the innocent; and (3) an implied request for acceptance from a community that may see them as prodigal sons and daughters. To the extent that they are cosmopolitans, these authors engage in a seductive dance that entices and wards away, a dance that parallels the slow teetering on the edge of knowledge that the chosen narrators never completely see, but enact.

Dipesh Chakrabarty interestingly argues in *Provincializing Europe* that "history writing assumes plural ways of being in the world," and these he chooses to designate "subaltern" histories that are marginalized "not because of any conscious intentions but because they represent moments or points at which the archive that the historian mines develops a degree of intractability with respect to the aims of professional history." Some scholars like Philippe Ariès may attempt to record the history of children and young adolescents, but in general these subject positions remain invisible.

As Chakrabarty notes in his unique use of the term, "elite and dominant groups can also have subaltern pasts to the extent that they participate in life—worlds subordinated by the 'major' narratives of the dominant institutions" (101). Children, even children of the elite, are arguably voiceless. Thus, what is represented by the choice of such a narrator or protagonist is a recognition by the author or filmmaker of his or her own alienation from the probable reader or viewer: don't mind me, I have no issues, I will simply observe and let my betters act upon what I show them.

In fact, of course, the issues that lie behind the portrayal of children as central protagonists are often among the most political, the most invested in contentious issues of economics, sexuality, and cultural transgression. In her introduction to postcolonial theory, Leela Gandhi quotes Edward Said's critique of a nativism that is used in the service of postcolonial nation-building. Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism* that "to leave the historical world for the metaphysics of essences like *négritude*, Irishness, Islam or Catholicism is to abandon history for essentialisations that have the power to turn human beings against each other" (cited in

Gandhi 109). Gandhi responds by writing that "Said's irate critique of overheated nativism is predicated upon his own overarching cosmopolitanism." He holds the view, she writes, "that nationalism—especially in its anti-colonial manifestation—is both a necessary and now entirely obsolete evil. . . . However, [in Gandhi's view] Said's argument is inclined to capitulate to the liberal perception of anti-colonial 'nativism' as the only remaining obstacle to the democratic utopia of free and fair internationalism." "A more just analysis demands that we first reconsider," writes Gandhi, "the discursive conditions which colour the somewhat paranoid antipathy toward the bogey of 'nativism'" (109). She adds that "modernity itself, far from being simply a benefit, can also be read . . . as an 'ordeal' which demands the palliative energies of so-called 'atavistic' enterprises" (110).

I must admit that my natural (i.e., white, western, male) inclination is to side with Said in this argument. However, I would like to set the question posed by him and Gandhi as a backdrop against which to consider three works that purport to anchor us in a localized but depoliticized world of children, but which provocatively invite our engagement with these postcolonial questions. These works share not only similar protagonists but also a locale, Bombay, that is significantly engaged in postcolonial questions, especially that of the cosmopolitan imagination and its role in re-membering the abandoned homeland. Surveying the expanding list of novels coming out of Bombay, Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta notes their remarkably cosmopolitan nature, their common theme of re-membering an abandoned homeland. How strange, she observes, that almost all of them

have been written by writers in exile from this city. Beginning with Rushdie, of course, who writes eternally and lovingly, in his fashion, about his "lost city." And then there's the sub-genre of the Parsi Bombay. Rohinton Mistry remembers the Bombay of the Fire Temple, the Parsi Dairy Farm, the Ratan Tata Institute, and troubled Gustad Noble going to Crawford Market. . . . There's "Baumgartner's Bombay" that we see at two removes: through the skilled, meticulous, overcrafted prose of Anita Desai, and the eyes of the German Jew Baumgartner who wonders if the rickety hotel he's taken to is the Taj Hotel. . . . The chawl-city that serves as setting for "ravan and Eddie," Kiran Nakargar's story of the Hindu Ravan and the Catholic Eddie who live in a

Byculla chawl. That Bombay that Vikram Chandra uses to locate his desultory "Love and Longing in Bombay," tales told by a retired South Indian civil servant living somewhere in Tardeo, telling his story in Fisherman's Rest, a little bar off Sassoon Dock; "Dharma," "Shakti," "Shanti," the stories are called. The racy Ashok Bander, the risqué Shobha De, and the facile Shashi Tharoor in "Show Business," where he sets his story of Ashok Banjara, Bollywood filmstar. (Indian Express 30 April 2000)

"Bombay is now Mumbai," she concludes. "And I see a new cityscape being drawn." The implication seems to be that it is being redrawn as much (or more so) by those who live abroad as by those, like herself, who continue to live in that vibrant city. How is the choice of a juvenile focus helpful for what are ultimately works questioning the definition not of a family but of a complex city and, by extension, of a troubled nation?

Two candidates that Mahadevan-Dasgupta mentions are Ardashir Vakil and Firdaus Kanga. Vakil's 1997 novel, *Beach Boy*, is set in Bombay in the early 1970s. It is the story of Cyrus Readymoney, the eight-year-old son of a successful Parsee shipping broker and a beautiful former tennis star. As the book's lighthearted blurb points out, Vakil's novel introduces us to the boy's "magical universe of movies and mischief, sex and samosas, tennis tournaments and truancy from school" (book jacket). Not quite the world the west thinks of when it thinks of Mohandas Gandhi, Nehru, Mother Theresa, and the other media markers for "India." Instead, the English-speaking reader is here offered a world in which Cyrus's "mind is filled with daydreams of being a grown-up, but with the collapse of his parents' marriage and his father's sudden death, Cyrus finds himself caught between the innocence of youth and the responsibilities of adulthood" (jacket).

Firdaus Kanga's 1990 novel, *Trying to Grow*, is also set in Bombay and seen through the eyes of an eight-year-old Parsee boy. This is the story of Daryus Kotwal, nicknamed "Brit" because he has *osteogenesis imperfecta* and his bones are brittle. Naturally, everyone, including the reader, assumes at first that the name is an homage to the British, and the notion lingers despite the family's vehement disavowal of this interpretation. They are, after all, inescapably anglophilic, and readers may reasonably imagine the brittle boy as an intriguing impersonation of the Raj and of its

devolution. In this sense the family steadfastly maintains an innocence that is excusable in Brit himself, but which seems a thematic ploy in Kanga's hands, a quiet suggestion that innocence past a certain point is simply pigheaded blindness.

And the third work thrown into this mix is Mira Nair's and Sooni Taraporevala's 1988 film, *Salaam Bombay!*, the story of Krishna, a ten-year-old who gets separated from his mother who works in a traveling circus. He wends his way to a much different Bombay than that of the two novels, trying desperately to earn enough money to rejoin his mother. The film is a heartbreaking study of the street children of Bombay, to whom Mira Nair dedicates the film and to some extent directs its message ("When we made *Salaam!*," she tells an interviewer, "it was a source of great pride that we could show the same film in Leicester Square and in a small town in India" [Stuart 210]). On a larger scale the film is a wrenching portrayal of the premature collapse of innocence under a repetitive assault by adults who seem incapable of stepping off the turning wheel of fortune (see Sant-Wade's discussion of this point, for example). Although the film centers on Krishna, the attention paid to his little adopted sister Manju and the rural girl "Sweet Sixteen" extends the canvas to include both sexes more convincingly than does either novel. At the movie's end, as Krishna is carted off to jail and Manju is sent to an orphanage, an old man turns to the boy and consoles him. The endless slums of the city pass before Krishna's eyes and the old man tells him, "One day in our India everything will be all right." If the old man believes it, the young boy no longer does. Bombay, in his mind and apparently in Mira Nair's, has become the world—timeless, a repeating cycle of sorrow and separation.

The portrayal of the shaping of a consciousness is a key component of these three works. Before his collapse into impotent knowledge Mira Nair's Krishna has made friends along the way, and together they do attempt to amuse themselves among the squalor. Sometimes this is through drugs, but in one memorable scene it is through film. Nair perhaps tweaks her viewers in this regard, paralleling Krishna's ultimate passivity with his earlier passive amusement in the theatre and implicitly suggesting the

unethical components of taking amusement in simply observing others. In any event, she is aware of her own audience. As long ago as 1984 the annual investment in film production was already one billion dollars, 75% of which was concentrated in Bombay (the rest, principally in Calcutta and Madras). Most successful films involve a great deal of dancing and singing, and most of the singing is "playback" from a half-dozen popular singers (Agrawal 182, 188-89). As Kapila Vatsyayan notes in *Traditional Indian Theatre* (1980), "the democratizing role of the theatre is obvious, particularly in details of performance and audience where the prince and the pauper rub shoulders with each other. The theatre in India is indeed a fifth veda with no class or caste barriers" (quoted in Agrawal 190). And perhaps this is even truer in cinema than in live theatre. In Nair's film the boys get into a theatre and watch a remarkable Bollywood portrayal of America, in which a buxom Indian woman sings how glorious it is to be Miss Hawaii. Her back-up singers are Indian men in blackface. Like Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled*,<sup>6</sup> Nair here recreates a bizarrely off-kilter minstrel show. Later, while the boys rob an old man who has befriended them, one of them reenacts the film, flirting with the man he has tied up and proclaiming the joys of being Miss Hawaii. Having loudly proclaimed in the theatre his equal right to enjoy the film, the boy now embodies its perverse effects in the world outside that theatre. Miss Hawaii writes back—but to what effect? Nair has wildly transformed childhood innocence into something that seems monstrous and pathological while maintaining a sadly semi-comic veneer. If others condemn the mimic men who would impose a neocolonialism on India, what alternate nativist vision can materialize in the theatre that Nair portrays? What access does the nation have to its own childhood and unselfconscious joy?

Her use of this image is one of the few direct portrayals of film in *Salaam Bombay!*, but the romantic images concocted in America and in Bombay echo throughout the film in many ways, evidencing themselves principally in the dreams that the brothel encourages its workers to enact. In the two novels the influence of the West in films and elsewhere is constant and, at least in Kanga's *Trying to Grow*, remarkably dominant. His characters, adult or adolescent, make practically no reference to Indian culture (on this point, see Sengupta). But they refer to an endless stream of



western artifacts and icons: *Playgirl*, *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, Betty Grable, Gregory Peck, Chopin, the Concorde, Rochefoucauld, the Big Bad Wolf, Shirley Temple, Leon Uris, Madame Defarge, Churchill, Enid Blyton, *Scrabble*, Kant, Turner, Debussy, *Klute*, the Mafia, James Bond, Perseus, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*, Raquel Welch, Heathcliff, Dylan Thomas, Marilyn Monroe, Barbara Cartland, Anne Frank, Masters and Johnson, Mae West, *Chariots of Fire*, Bach, Vidal Sassoon, Sean Connery, Walter Matthau, Rebecca, Margaret Thatcher, *MAD* magazine, George Patton—the references proliferate, and we've only reached the middle of the novel. In a form of occidentalism nurtured by Indian media, the mysterious (and powerful) West becomes a unitary blur for these Bombay children—even for Nair's, but even more so, perhaps, for Kanga's and Vakil's. As one of the Hindu characters remarks, "Anglophilia [is] the Parsee disease" (Kanga 164).

In Ardashir Vakil's *Beach Boy* the narrator's father and grandfather are both heavily influenced by the poetry of Keats; their furniture is Chippendale; they drive an American car; their education is by the Jesuits. When the narrator projects stories about the Bombay landscape, he imagines it all through the eyes of Miss Havisham of *Great Expectations*. But his engagement with film is markedly more pronounced than that of Kanga's young Daryus Kotwal, probably because he had easier access to the theatres. As Vakil's Cyrus Readymoney puts it, "[he had] developed a feverish hankering for Hindi cinema. Mesmerized by its idols, [he] rushed to see them perform and came out copying their every move. After seeing *Apna Desh*, *Kati Patang*, *Aradhana*, *Daag*, and *Namak Haram* [he] began to act like Rajesh Khanna" (Vakil 66). "After seeing *Zanzeer* and *Deewar* [he] took on the sonorous lilt of Amitabh Bachan's serious lines; after seeing *Bobby*, the playful sing-song syllables of Rishi Kapoor" (66). To a western reader it all sounds remarkably like Hollywood, as if Vakil sees no essential difference between the romanticizing of either culture. But something marvelous happens, from the young man's point of view. "This dream world," writes Cyrus, "crossed over into real life when people mistook [him] for Junior Mehmood. . . . the most popular child actor on the Hindi screen"

(67). In a strange intersection with Mira Nair's stark Bombay, Vakil's hero speaks of "the boys of the street, dirty rags in hand," weaving between cars and approaching him in traffic. "They would call out to their friends," explains Cyrus, "who would all come and surround the car and peer in as if in wonderment at some exotic animal" (67). He plays along with their fantasy, pretending he is the child star and sharing a common appreciation of a certain indigenous and, if you will, nativist cultural artifact. "I could show off my knowledge of Hindi cinema with these boys," he writes (68). But "for the children of my parents' friends, whom I was sometimes forced to meet, this world, the world on our doorstep, the world on the street, the world on the hundreds of billboard advertisements around the city, was as alien and as repellent as the underworld of rats in the sewers of the city" (68). As much as Bollywood seems to westerners to be a simple carbon copy of the world of Betty Grable (with, at times, an overlay of Hindu mythology), Vakil insists on the class distinctions that separate it from the world of Cyrus's parents—begging the question, whose nativism is to be valorized? Who are the curators of this national treasure? And who among the lower classes, let alone the anglophilic classes that Vakil describes, would look to such a heritage for "answers" to the crises of neocolonialism?

This scene in the street, as well as the earlier scene with Krishna in the theatre, are strangely reminiscent of photographer Dario Mitidieri's prize-winning *Children of Bombay*, the product of his year among the city's street children. As he remarks in that book's foreword, "Bombay is known to most children as the 'City of Hope,' the place of pink palaces and movie stars that they have seen in countless Hindi films. . . . [But for these] children life continues as it always has; ignored, abused, exploited, their eyes full of hope and sometimes despair, the latest song from a Hindi film on their lips" (6-7). On the one hand, Cyrus proudly transgresses his (mistaken?) notion that his social class does not know and relish Hindi cinema; on the other hand, he dons a mantle impervious to the disease of poverty—the disguise of the Bombay matinee idol. In a less heavy-handed way than Nair's Miss Hawaii incident, Vakil suggests that the innocence that relishes the escapism of film parallels the adult world of pretence that cannot cope with the poverty that will not go away.

As it happens, Firdaus Kanga wrote the preface to Mitideri's book of photos. To hear him tell it, Kanga's personal experiences with the children of the street was somewhat less sanguine than those of Ardashir Vakil's protagonist. He writes:

When I wheeled out in my pram they walked beside me, and when my pram turned into a wheelchair they jogged by my side. When my parents lovingly, carefully put me into a taxi . . . these little boys, and sometimes girls, would wave at me encouragingly or hoot with laughter. They could not understand why an eight year old boy needed care when as old as I, they were earning their living already. Their hungry arms as thin as mine but often covered in sores and scabies interrupted my drive; I would cringe in my seat and pray for the traffic lights to change colour. . . . And so, I lived with these children, their smell in my nostrils, their dark eyes and sudden smiles like frames from a film I wanted to forget. (9)

The real world, instinctively it seems, is compared to a film—one that remains indelible. Years later in the comparative comfort of London and the prestige that his writing had brought him, Kanga would again reflect back on related issues and, in a favorable review of Roland Joffe's *City of Joy*, suggest the double-edged nature of Indian poor children and their portrayal by artists in the West. He writes:

The poor are a dangerous subject in India, to talk—or make a film—about them is seen as an encouragement of social unrest. More fundamentally, making poverty psychologically visible to a society where moral blindness provides the only relief from all-encompassing horror is seen as unkind. And to a culture battered by centuries of invasion, of which the British was only the last, films about destitution are an unendurable blow to a fragile self-esteem. As the godfather in Joffe's film says to the American: money, for him, is a beautiful wall, not just something with which you can buy things. (19)

A beautiful wall, dividing those who live in a squalor that is punctuated with the occasional filmic fantasy from those who, perhaps, create such diversions. The cosmopolitanism that shapes the childhood of the protagonists in both Vakil's and Kanga's novel also shapes the authors of those novels, the very production of the novel itself, as well as the audience for that form of entertainment. Kanga's nonchalant description of the common Indian mentality as one that seeks to deny the "all-encompassing

horror" would fit some people's definition of the *faux* innocence that hangs over these works of art.

Clearly, there are issues of class in both novels, issues that somewhat mitigate or overtake an analysis of *western* cultural hegemony. If Vakil seems more focused on these class distinctions than does Firdaus Kanga, portraying various families and levels of caste in Indian society in which the child narrator innocently travels, he ultimately steps back from social analysis to cast the young narrator's experiences in a larger, non-national context. The boy's habit of imagination is visual, fleeting, piecemeal; not surprisingly, for someone so young, whether it all has anything to do with the creation of a nation seems an irrelevant question. He says:

The words and images of my life were like rush-hour passengers piling into the vast entrance of Churchgate station; I imagined them all jostling and pushing for position, throwing themselves in through the door. And when the train leaves the station most of them have been left behind, like the people I'd met whom I couldn't remember, like the things that I'd heard that I couldn't recall, like the hundreds of minutes and days in my life that were nothing in the calendar of my brain. (176)

He could be any young member of his social class, living anywhere, growing nostalgic in retrospect as he senses the loss of an earlier innocence. But not necessarily pining over the loss of Indianness.

He has been shaped by the West as surely as has Firdaus Kanga's narrator, and this perhaps in opposition to the nativist construction of a postcolonial India that would see him as a tragic rather than a comic figure. Thus, Vakil's narrator records:

I used to peer at the cigarette advertisements in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*: Marlboro men on their horses, women smoking Virginia Slims in Victorian underwear, with the logo, 'You've come a long way, baby!' and Salem girls, dark-haired, blue-jeaned, healthy women, romping around with some tanned muscular jocks. The women laughed while training a hose pipe on the men. These were clean, fresh, fun-loving, minty-breathed Americans. I stared intently at these modern gods, trying to catch every detail and motion of their bodies. White, foreign, but so within reach on the page. One day, I told myself, I would be there. In those green New England woods in the background of the picture. (102)

Miss Hawaii, or haughty New England Salem girls—the imaginative escapes of Mira Nair's Krishna and Ardashir Vakil's Cyrus are many worlds apart, though they share in common the commodified notion of America as something better, something Krishna will never come near, something clearly within reach for Cyrus and for his creator.

In portraying the escape available through the typical Bombay film, Nair's more realistic study of street children silhouettes the dubious role it plays in what some have described as the Indian psyche. Gautam Dasgupta, for example, compares the parallel development of Hollywood and Bollywood, and suggests that, in the latter, "there is slight difference between what the Indian film pundits refer to as 'theological' (films heavily dependent on religious and mythic themes) and the popular domestic melodramas":

What the Bombay cinema did do was, in a sense, latch on to a feudal sensibility, spewing homespun homilies and denying the cinema its modernist privilege. . . . By failing to answer the call of modernism, the Bombay cinema used the medium to further the cause of an archaic worldview, which is part religion and part myth, the two implicated in a melodramatic form that pays lip service to realism and secularism. These films presented a naive approach to the world and its problems, easy solutions clothed in fairytale-like fantasies that willfully rejected a complex and mature understanding of everyday life. (40)

Dasgupta is suggesting that this "naive" approach is valorized in Bombay films not only for the poor, but for the intelligentsia, as well, ("a primal hold on the national psyche" [40], in fact) discouraging attempts to "individuate characterization," and instead encouraging the acceptance of "one's predestined station in life" (41). Thus, the so-called "escape" is just the opposite. Krishna and his slum friends know they will return to the streets—and Ardashir Vakil's and Firdaus Kanga's privileged children know this about the street children, as well. Thank God, they almost audibly sigh.

Beyond the portrayal of class distinctions, the various other markers of subject positions in the three works suggest a fascinating layering of degrees of alienation from indigenous Indian society. The portrayal of gender and religion in these

works, for example, further complicates anything that one might wish to say about the interchange globalization negotiates between modernity and nativism. The role religion plays here is crucial, especially when mixed with issues of race, as in the case of the Parsees; they take center stage in the two novels and are invisible in the film. Firdaus Kanga is especially insistent in begging the question of the comfort level of Parsees, still asking themselves, both implicitly and explicitly throughout *Trying to Grow*, just how Indian (how Hindu?) they are allowed to be—or, more pointedly, choose to be. The boys know very little about Zoroastrianism, in any case. In Nair's film, as Arvindra Sant-Wade points out, Hinduism is given short shrift (169). In the last act, when Krishna stabs the pimp who has controlled the life of Manju's mother, Reyka, the (innocent?) violence is rendered righteous in comparison to that echoed in the religious fervor outside. As Krishna and Reyka lose themselves in the chanting crowd, they also lose each other—and the boy is irrecoverably on his own, a non-entity as far as any of those around him are concerned (as, of course, is Reyka).

The question, Whose nativism?, lurks just beneath the surface in any Parsee-centered novel. And in these two, the issue of sexuality further complicates the picture of Parsees and further marginalizes them, since Kanga and Vakil, perhaps surprisingly, both choose as narrators young boys who discover that they are gay (or are they?). In both cases, paralleling the Parsees' recurring discomfort regarding the choice of nationality, Kanga and Vakil refuse to let their narrators settle in to their sexuality. They bob and weave around their orientation, as if to avoid what might strike them or some of their Indian readers as a further capitulation to western cultural hegemony, another cosmopolitan devolution. Indian response to the novels seems just as evasive on this issue (see, for example, Sengupta). More venturesome treatments of the topic of homosexuality can recently be found in such novels as P. Parivaraj's *Shiva and Arun* (1998). Subsequent to his early novel, though, Kanga is much more blunt. In his praise for Mitidieri's honest photography and the criticism it received from many Indians, he writes that

Indian society, worn threadbare by centuries of conquest, has allowed its insecurities to turn into intolerance of all criticism, its terror of what it sees in its streets into the oblivion of

silence. As someone who grew up both disabled and homosexual, and as someone who speaks about the pain of being these things in India, I have seen the horror and the hate in those faces to whom I was holding up a mirror. (Mitidieri 11)

Why such "horror" and "hate" thrown in the face of such an unusual child? Why such subsequent delight in holding up the insulting mirror from afar? Perhaps the poverty-stricken children were laughing at more than his wheelchair, with their innocence having been shattered long ago by their too-early exposure to a sexualized world!

The extreme sensitivity Kanga recognizes in Indian response to films like Joffe's *City of Joy*, and by extension to Nair's *Salaam Bombay!*, underscores not only a national irritability to external criticism in matters of social squalor, but also to what Dasgupta, again, analyzes as "a psycho-sexual attitude that prevails in India" (41):

Prolongation of childhood into adult years is widely viewed as a much desired and desirable arc in the trajectory of individual growth. . . . [I]n India there is a hidden dread of the *process* of maturation. Life is not experienced as an organic experiential growth from one stage to another, but as discrete units compartmentalized as childhood and adulthood, their boundaries distinct and separated by a very fine and clearly demarcated line. The two stages are therefore contiguous, and as such the social and psychic ideas that prevail in childhood skip over into the adult phase. (41)

Nair's films do not fit this fantasy, clearly, as they relentlessly show the destruction of "naivete" in characters like Krishna, Manju, "Sweet Sixteen," and the others. Vakil's novel, on the other hand, seems to parallel the world of film in its prolonged "protection" of its central children. But his parents do threaten to end the child's idyll; in fact, reality intrudes all too painfully before Vakil has told the complete tale. Kanga's child-narrator, on the other hand, is surely not the "typical" Indian child, and his inescapable and very visible suffering, his ticket to premature adult insight, seems to parallel not the Bollywood fantasy but the too-soon harshness of Krishna's street savvy. Perhaps this partially explains the fleeting unnamed homosexual encounter in Vakil and the mercurial sexuality in Kanga's protagonist—the desire on their part, if not on their authors, to evade any more direct wising-up.

As Freud once said, one can stand only so much truth? Or, one's readers can only stand so much from an expatriate.

In any case, we can conclude where we began, with Leela Gandhi. She quotes Benedict Anderson to the effect that "nations are imaginative and cultural artefacts rather than empirical and scientific entities. They are imagined into coherence because 'the members of even the smallest nations never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'" (151). Perhaps this is true, but *Salaam Bombay!*, *Trying to Grow*, and *Beach Boy* offer scant evidence for it: what communal nation do Krishna, Daryus, Cyrus and the others envision? As Kanga notes, Mitidieri's photography grants his subjects the dignity of occasional celebration "when they throw back their dark unwashed heads and laugh." "It is the ring of that laughter," he (hopefully? angrily?) suggests, "answering their lives that we hear when we put away his book. And because we hear the possibilities in that laughter, we grieve" (11). Krishna has a cruel, probably short, life ahead of him in streets that could be found in most major nations. Meanwhile, the children in Kanga's and Vakil's universe leave India behind and move to the capital of the colonizer's homeland. Where is *their* "nation"? What is their "nativist" cause if the true native dies on the streets of Bombay? Kanga, however, remarks that Mitidieri's "photographs have a universality—these children could as easily be from Brazil or Burkina Faso" (10). He would seem to be saying that there is nothing specifically "Indian" about them.

The effects of globalization are changing the ways that artists will imagine children in the future, or portray the *imaginations* of such children. In a striking case of the Empire writing back, for example, the invasion of Great Britain by Bollywood (see Heather Tyrrell on this) demonstrates that India is now transforming England's children, shaping them in its own image much as the Empire once shaped the Parsee children as portrayed by Kanga and Vakil. The Empire still can call some of the shots, but who in the future will be allowed to speak for that Empire becomes increasingly difficult to determine. Quoting one video-shop owner in London, Tyrrell remarks that "'the children [of immigrant Indians] prefer *Titanic*, and anyway younger Asians speak Punjabi or Gujarati at home; they don't learn Hindi.' With



so many disparate audiences to please, Hindi cinema has learned to be tough. But how far will Bollywood go to woo Britain's prodigal children?" (22). And if these prodigal children ever return "home," will their fathers and mothers recognize them as native sons and daughters?

## Notes

1. The phrase "national culture" is one that recalls pre-colonial civilization and valorizes aboriginal cultural values, as seen in Cabral's *Unity and Struggle* (New York: Monthly, 1979, 148, 153).

2. Fanon warns against a blind discarding of the benefits of colonization in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington.

3. Trinh Minh-ha wonders whether it is ever possible for an anthropologist to see natives "as they see each other," using Malinowski's work among Trobriander Islanders (*Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. 1922. New York: Dutton, 1961).

4. Lars von Trier, Danish filmmaker (1956- ), awarded prizes at Cannes and elsewhere for *Europa* (1991).

5. *Thérèse* won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes.

6. Andrea Stuart remarks that "the separatist/nationalist imperative of the work of Directors such as Spike Lee seems incompatible with Nair's positive attitude to intermingling and cross-fertilization" (214), such as that portrayed in *Mississippi Masala*. Stuart notes that "for 'New World Upstarts' like Nair, migration is not necessarily a tragedy leading to irrecoverable loss. . . . Instead of anguish, Nair revels in the melange migration creates; instead of sinking into nostalgia, her characters move forward to embrace their hard-won new place. [Writes Nair:] 'I believe strongly that to be Masala, to be mixed, is the new world order'" (Stuart 212). Perhaps this goes a long way in answering the frequent criticism expressed by Indians against their compatriots who write about India but live abroad.

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