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Through a Lens Darkly: Investigating ‘Reality’ in *The Village*

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing

Bath Spa University

School of Humanities and Cultural Industries

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Abstract

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March 2015

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‘Through a Lens Darkly: Investigating “Reality” in *The Village*’ documents the process of rewriting my novel *The Village*. Organised into three sections, in addition to the full manuscript of the published novel itself, this thesis sets out to examine the ways in which I sought to represent a particular authorial reality in the final draft, after registering its absence in the first version of the book. The first section tackles the process of writing the first draft, the response from my editor, and a distillation of the flaws in the story-telling approach that I felt were preventing the text from having an authentic quality at that point. The second section documents the first part of my endeavour to correct this, through my search for telling detail within video and audio recordings of Sanganer (the North Indian ‘prison-village’ on which *The Village* is modelled). The third section focuses on the specific influence of three writers on the style and content of the final draft of the novel: Doris Lessing, James Salter and Daniyal Mueenuddin. I read Lessing for insight on tackling issues of exotica and colonialism within the text, Salter for the ability to create a diffuse, ambiguous point of view (in order to force the reader to engage with his or her own viewpoint), and Mueenuddin for techniques to create a powerful sense of place. I have given examples of the ways in which my engagement with these aspects of craft had impact on the final, published version of *The Village*. A short summary of the novel is given in the appendix at the end of this document.

All references to *The Village: a doctoral thesis* are to the manuscript of the novel supplied as the second part of this manuscript.

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II

THE VILLAGE – A NOVEL

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[Section redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 I was working on a television programme entitled *Prison Weekly* in the BBC Community Programmes Unit in London. It was one of my first jobs in television: a low budget weekly magazine show that aimed to showcase life in prisons around the world. We were a small team of four people, and all expected to film using the new small portable digital video cameras that had entered the market, rather than with the camera crews available to programmes with a larger budget. Due to my ability to speak Hindi, I was asked to find a story set in India, and told that I would be able to visit and film the story myself, in spite of my lack of experience. My knowledge of the language was seen as very valuable by the producers of the programme, they hoped it signified the ability to build trust within an otherwise closed and insular community.

I found a story that would fascinate me for the next decade. Sanganer prison, one hundred kilometres from the town of Jaipur in Rajasthan, the north of India, is a prison ‘village’ for lifers containing 120 huts built by the inmates themselves. Every inmate has killed someone, and is able to live on site with his or her family. Prisoners are reunited with their spouses and children after a period of six years in a conventional prison. The residents of the prison are pretty much allowed to come and go as they please, other than a roll call at six o’clock in the morning and six o’clock in the evening, and work in the local town, with their children attending the school locally too. In over fifty years, there have been negligible re-offending or escape rates, with only two or three recorded escapes, and no records of re-offending. The villagers pay taxes on their earnings, and are entirely self-sufficient; the prison is run at no cost to the taxpayer.

I visited the prison in December 1995 and filmed in the prison for a week. We were a crew of 3 people, including the presenter of our show, an ex armed robber who had been in and out of UK penal institutions from a young age. During that first visit I considered several themes that would make their way into my novel *The Village*, over a decade later. My first concern was the gaze of the film crew. We were British, filming an Indian community, and nearly always viewing

the inhabitants of the village through a lens. This dynamic raised issues of hierarchy and representation that reminded me of the depiction of anthropology in Joseph Conrad's seminal text *Heart of Darkness*. I became interested in television as a modern tool of anthropology, particularly the fact that it is constructed without the rigour, research and accountability of academic anthropology. This notion of a western gaze on an eastern population, (including the idea of 'poverty porn', described by Katherine Hansen as 'words and images that elicit an emotional response by their sheer shock value') and the desire for that population to fulfil a certain colonial assumption or need for the western onlookers would become an important framing device in *The Village*.¹

I was also interested in the manipulation of what could be classified as 'reality', required by us as the film crew to create a valuable story, one with narrative drive on screen. This process of manufacturing 'fake' versions of reality to create compelling narrative would present itself again and again throughout my television career of seven years at the BBC. We operated on the assumption that raising awareness for a marginalised community (for example victims of domestic abuse, or economic misfortune) by getting high ratings, would justify the process by which the ratings were attained. This idea that small crimes are forgivable if performed in the service of a greater good, would become a central axis for moral conundrums in the narrative of *The Village*. My plotting of the book focused on the philosophical idea of consequentialism, the belief that 'the ends justify the means'², and the problem of being truly responsible for the outcome of one's actions. The implications of this are summarised in Bertrand Russell's famous quote 'I would never die for my beliefs because I might be wrong'.³ I also became interested in the notion of truth

¹ Katherine Hansen, 'From Poverty Porn to Humanitarian Story-telling', *A Storied Career blog*, 4 February 2009
<<http://astoriedcareer.com/2009/02/from-poverty-porn-to-humanitar.html>> [accessed 15 February 2014], p.1.
See also Alice Miles. 'Shocked by Slumdog's Poverty Porn' *The Times*, 14 January 2009
<<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/law/columnists/article2048284.ece>> [accessed 15 February 2014] p.1.

² John Mizzoni, *Ethics: The Basics* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley & Sons, 2009) p.104.

³ Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956) p.36.

The full quote is as follows: 'I think we ought always to entertain our opinions with some measure of doubt. I shouldn't wish people dogmatically to believe any philosophy, not even mine. I would never die for my beliefs because I might be wrong. If a man is offered a fact which goes against his instincts, he will scrutinise it closely, and unless the evidence is overwhelming, he will refuse to believe it. If, on the other hand, he is offered something which affords a reason for acting in accordance to his instincts, he will accept it even on the slightest evidence. The origin of myths is explained in this way.'

or ‘vérité’ in documentary representation.⁴ I was particularly intrigued by Werner Herzog’s assertion that ‘filmmakers of cinema vérité resemble tourists who take pictures amid ancient ruins of facts.’⁵ How could one film reality, without it being either a reconstruction, or ‘ruin’ of reality?

I was very interested in the ethical questions of crime, punishment and rehabilitation raised by the prison itself. As a team, and a programme, we were very positive about the way in which the prison was so successful in terms of rehabilitation. And yet, for every family visible to us (that had been reunited in the prison), there was an invisible family somewhere that could never be reunited due to the permanent loss of one person in the family through homicide. Due to the idyllic surroundings it was easy to forget that each person in the prison had killed someone. This tension of competing human rights (the rights of the prisoners versus the rights of the families of the victims) concerned me greatly. It felt, at that time, to be a question for which I had no simple answer. Certainly the medium available to me, was not sufficient. Documentary filmmaking did not feel malleable enough for me to explore the question honestly. It was only when I attempted to write the piece as a fictional story, that I felt I could truly attempt to understand this aspect of the prison, due to the freedom to invent and present situations, as I pleased.

The final issue of interest to me during this initial trip was the way in which I was seen by the programme team to have a validity of perspective through language. My ability to speak Hindi meant that I was seen by the BBC crew to be able to ‘go native’ as it were, and gain the trust of the people who would end up on camera. This was a huge responsibility, and one that was subject to abuse. Although as employees we had been trained in how to use a low budget camera, we had not been trained in how to handle the confessions and intimate revelations of people we would interview on camera. As a documentary maker you are expected to befriend the people you use to

⁴ The term is used here as pioneered in the 1961 Jean Rouch film, *Chronique d'un été* documented in the IMDB database as follows: Jean Rouch, 'Chronicle of a Summer', *IMDB* <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054745/>> [accessed 20 February 2014] p.1.

⁵ Werner, Herzog 'Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema', *Walker Art Magazine*, 30 April 1999 <<http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/1999/minnesota-declaration-truth-and-fact-in-docum>> [accessed 10 June 2014] p.1. The article also contains the following quote: 'One well-known representative of Cinema Verite declared publicly that truth can be easily found by taking a camera and trying to be honest. He resembles the night watchman at the Supreme Court who resents the amount of written law and legal procedures. "For me," he says, "there should be only one single law: the bad guys should go to jail."' p.2.

populate your film, and this relationship struck me as being akin to the relationship between a counsellor (or therapist) and patient. There was a marked difference, however, in that our aims were to get ratings on television, rather than to help troubled interviewees reach a form of peace. We knew, for example, as a team that we needed dramatic moments, like tears on camera, for the programme to really soar in terms of ratings.⁶ Being able to speak the local language gave me a privileged position, and I became interested in the power of language and translation, the choice of words available to interview someone or write a story, specifically the Orwellian idea that ‘if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.’⁷ Later, when I began writing *The Village*, I explored the way in which this dynamic of translation and trust could function as part of the narrative thrust of the book.

I returned to Sanganer prison village twice after this first visit: once in 2005, when I was no longer a BBC employee, with a view to re-acquainting myself with the place in order to write *The Village*, and then again in 2008, for more on-site research.

⁶ This idea of needing tears for dramatic impact would later form part of the climax of *The Village* in a scene where Ray, the central protagonist sets out to gain tears from her key interviewee, and is successful in doing so.

⁷ George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* (London: Horizon, 1946), p.15.

CHAPTER 1

Process: the construction and reception of a first draft

I completed the first draft of *The Village* on 15 August 2010, and sent it to my editor at Viking UK a week later. To my mind, this draft was effective on many levels. Firstly, it had managed to establish the major characters in the novel, and their conflicting needs. I felt I had also established the ethical and moral landscape of the book, the key questions at the heart of the narrative, as detailed in the previous section.

This draft set out the main contours of the plot: a BBC film crew journey to a ‘prison village’ to film the inhabitants for a documentary, and manipulate the contributors with disastrous consequences. There were three main storylines:

- i) A narrative strand concerning the slow implosion of the three-person BBC film crew, including drug-taking and sexual escapades
- ii) A plotline built around the pollution of the relationship between Ray, the British-Indian filmmaker, and her ‘alter ego’, Nandini. Ray convinces Nandini to face the man who tried to kill her, for the sake of the storyline in the documentary she is filming.
- iii) A suspenseful build towards the revelation of a secret in the community. This information is revealed to the film crew before it is revealed to the inhabitants (one of the members is found to be HIV positive by the visiting doctor), and this information is withheld so that it can be presented on camera to the HIV positive man and his wife. After this event Ray leaves the village with the filmed tapes, gets on to a local train, and throws them out of the window.

There were, however, a number of problems with the first draft, mostly concerning the verisimilitude of the world that I had created. These were listed in my editor's response in an email as follows:

On Thu, Sep 9, 2010 at 12:50 PM, Mount, Mary wrote:

... I think the setting and premise are absolutely terrific and have huge potential but at the moment it feels like you're not using your setting and great premise to its full effect. When you do, it is so, so good. But often it feels as if the story, or Ray's dilemmas could be going on anywhere. You need to really use the originality of what you have in terms of place and set up to really bring out the story, the tension, the uncomfortable relationships, the characters, the themes, the points you want to make. I'm afraid at this point it feels as if there is far too much telling and not enough showing. It felt as if the reader is not allowed to discover Ray or understand her feeling within the context. We are told too much about her inner thoughts and her backstory (her past relationships for example) without knowing why we should care about her. So, my thoughts below are about returning to a sense of discovery, about making use of the place and the people to bring out the themes, about creating a cracking story. Your descriptions of place and images are wonderful, your construction of relationships terrific but the story needs to be allowed to unfold. I also felt, for large parts of the novel, that it could have been set anywhere - that you had lost the sense of why the prison itself was so important. You have lots to say about morality, about perspective, about justice - but the power lies in the reader being able to FEEL these things...

Don't just have the village relationships as seen through interviews. The reader isn't interested in the day-to-day mechanics of making a documentary - they want a sense of character and tension. There is far too much film stuff - I'm afraid that it's just not interesting to the reader. I think you can insert it from time to time when it is absolutely essential to the narrative but it's not interesting of itself...This has the potential to be as strong as Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* or Naipaul's *In a Free State* but I feel at the moment the focus is on the wrong things. The present is much more interesting than Ray's personal past, the setting and characters lend themselves perfectly to dramatic tension.⁸

Although this response was tough to take, I agreed with much of it. So, using this email as a starting point, I decided to interrogate myself as a writer, and work out what was affecting me. What was impeding the novel from really engaging the imagination? It was very important to me, to achieve my aims as a novelist, and to write a book that would be consuming for the reader. I isolated a list of issues, using my editor's email as a starting point, as shown below.

⁸ Mary Mount (email to the author, 9 Sept 2010) quoted with permission.

1. CONTEXT

‘I also felt, for large parts of the novel, that it could have been set anywhere.’⁹

I examined the first draft, and noted a lack of scene-setting and descriptive detail with regard to the prison itself, in the first draft. Due to the fear of writing clichéd descriptions of India, and falling victim to the same issues of representation that were to be tackled in the book (the problem of arrogance and condescension when viewing an Indian community through a western gaze), my first draft contained very few descriptions of the environment and location of the action.

2. STYLE OVER CONTENT

‘Don't just have the village relationships as seen through interviews. The reader isn't interested in the day-to-day mechanics of making a documentary - they want a sense of character and tension.’¹⁰

I could see that the first draft contained a lack of specificity of character detail for the Indian characters. Village inhabitants were often seen through the lens of the camera, as part of Ray’s point of view. This issue was also down to anxiety about representation – and the intrusion necessary to provide coherent backstories for the Indian characters in the book through more penetrating research. Many of the characters in the book had low socio-economic status, and while I had research on the functioning and way of life in the prison itself, I did not have enough knowledge of those sectors of Indian society – the manual labourers and those inhabitants who had been living in poverty before coming to Sanganer Prison. Given that many of the crimes had economic triggers (whether over dowry or family property), this aspect was an important omission in the book.

⁹ Mary Mount (email to the author, 9 Sept 2010) quoted with permission.

¹⁰ Mary Mount (email to the author, 9 Sept 2010) quoted with permission.

By using the stylistic device in the book, of only seeing local characters when filming, or through a lens, I had further limited the ability for the reader to identify with the Indian characters, thereby replicating the problem facing Ray in the novel (of objectifying the Indian characters so that they become part of the background). In always portraying them this way myself, albeit as part of an ironic element in the novel, I had created a world of cardboard Indian characters, surrounding the British film crew – potentially an extremely frustrating experience for the reader.

3. EXPOSITION

‘I’m afraid at this point it feels as if there is far too much telling and not enough showing.’¹¹

Due to the desire to explore the philosophical idea of consequentialism (as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis), the first draft contained many sections of interiority for the main character Ray. Following her thought processes in this way led to quite a lot of overt analysis of the themes in the book, and not enough action. It was very self-referential without necessarily being interesting to the reader. Ray writes a series of letters to an esteemed friend in the first draft, in which she argues issues of ‘the greater good’ and the varying schools of documentary thought. A sample letter is provided here:

FROM: Ray Bhullar

TO: Ravi Sakit

RE: Questions.

Dear Ravi,

It’s difficult to explain this place or the transitions I’ve been through already since arriving here. Something is opening up. We haven’t started filming yet, but already, I need to ask you some questions as usual. Humour me. Obviously I assume you don’t need notes on the genesis of the questions, we’ve known each other for long enough. But I’ll do some footnotes at the end if there is time.

¹¹ Mary Mount (email to the author, 9 Sept 2010) quoted with permission.

1. Do you believe that we have an absolute responsibility to do unto others as you would have done to you etc? Sometimes it seems to me that in an agnostic universe, this is the only useful guiding line in terms of morality and action? How can this work in documentary though, which relies on getting people to reveal themselves, 'for the greater good', without revealing anything about ourselves?

2. What are your thoughts on lust and the personal vanity that accompanies the recipients and the arbiters of lust? 3. Are actions more important than words? Given that words are the most common way in which we present ourselves in contemporary living, do we have a duty to act in a manner that is commensurate with the words we use to describe ourselves? How does privacy fit into this? What is the function and purpose of a private act which is never confessed to anyone? Do secrets have their place?

Hope all is well with Amanda. You are missed.

Cheers, Ray.¹²

This kind of letter provided the first draft with something that I had hoped would be a slightly postmodern element to the novel, in which the themes of the novel - for example, the power of documentary as propaganda or anthropology in contemporary society, or how to 'be good' in an 'agnostic universe' could be openly fleshed out, as a debate that might be amusing and engaging for the reader. It was also an attempt to allow the reader access to a different aspect of Ray's interior life: something that hovers between public and private and presents her as a different person from the one who interacts with the film crew or the village inhabitants. However, this series of letters was affecting the novel in quite a serious way. The parallel narrative, the mannered style, seemed to drastically impede the momentum of the novel.

4. BACKSTORY

'We are told too much about her inner thoughts and her back story (her past relationships for example) without knowing why we should care about her.'¹³

The anxiety of depicting India in a clichéd way had led me to write in quite a lot of back story for the central characters who form the film crew in the book, set in the BBC offices in London. I saw

¹² Nikita Lalwani, *Village - a first draft* (unpublished: 2010), p.30.

¹³ Mary Mount (email to the author, 9 Sept 2010) quoted with permission.

this as safe territory: something that I could do well, I imagined, from my past experience of setting my first novel in the UK. In terms of descriptive detail, it was also something that I believed I could write authentically. This approach led me down a cul-de-sac, in which I found myself writing more and more British material, specifically several background chapters alternating with the ‘foreground’ chapters set in the prison. The result was a huge loosening of the tension and atmosphere of the book. I had originally envisioned the novel as slowly building in suspense, in the pressure-cooker environment of the prison. The reader would see the film crew on site, in the village adapting to life there day after day, and then week after week with an upward curve of tension. By leaving the present day narrative again and again, this forward thrust of the book (the momentum once again), was diluted so that there seemed to be very little jeopardy in the first third of the novel.

I sought to solve these problems with the first draft through a combination of different types of research as detailed in subsequent chapters of this thesis. I took as my maxim, a James Salter quote from the *Paris Review*: ‘I would rather be in a room with someone who is telling me the story of his life, which may be exaggerated and even have lies in it, but I want to hear the true story, essentially.’¹⁴ My aim was to return to the method I used in my first novel – to start with material gleaned from life, whether my own or the lives of other people – and to work at this material, change it and manipulate it, to create fiction. My research consisted of two elements, as explained in the following chapters: a search for telling details, and inter-textual research.

¹⁴ Hirsch, Edward (Interviewer) ‘James Salter: The Art of Fiction’ *Paris Review* 133, (1993), p.43.

CHAPTER 2

A search for the telling details

I had done quite a bit of research for the novel, prior to the first draft, but had not studied it closely whilst writing the novel. During the rewriting of the novel, I returned to these key interviews and filmed sequences to find important detail. In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood writes that as readers we ‘snag’ on detail:

Literature differs from life in that life is amorphously full of detail, and rarely directs us toward it, whereas literature teaches us to notice—to notice the way my mother, say, often wipes her lips just before kissing me; the drilling sound of a London cab when its diesel engine is flabbily idling; the way old leather jackets have white lines in them like the striations of fat in pieces of meat; the way fresh snow ‘creaks’ underfoot; the way a baby’s arms are so fat that they seem tied with string ...¹⁵

In returning to the oral interviews that I had done for the novel, and the actual videotapes that I had filmed when visiting the prison for the first time for the BBC in 1998, I realized that I had an abundance of this detail at my disposal – it was my job to sift through it, and isolate the elements that would help the verisimilitude of the book, in the words of Wood above, it was my job to ‘notice’ the details that would be valuable in the telling of the story.

Here are the findings of that reassessment.

1. ORAL INTERVIEWS

Neelam Vishnoi

Neelam Vishnoi was a real-life prototype for the fictional Nandini character in *The Village*. She was a counsellor I met on site when I returned to the prison in 2005, as a novelist rather than a BBC filmmaker. Upon returning to the interviews with Neelam, which were handwritten in my notebook, I looked for her speech patterns, her way of explaining her own life story: the way in which she

¹⁵ Wood, James, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage, 2009), p.52.

presented the narrative of her life, and the details that she considered important in the telling of it. An example of this, (the constituent elements of her dowry), is presented in the following passage from the published version of *The Village*:

'My husband and his mother locked me up in the box room of our house. It was because they wanted more dowry, they said my parents hadn't delivered the agreed goods. It was an arranged marriage, you know, and my parents had no idea that they were sending me to this kind of family. They gave so much when we were married: fifty thousand rupees cash, a gold chain, a scooter - furniture of the house, a fridge, a washing machine, my mother gave me pure gold sets of jewellery that became the property of the household.'¹⁶

These simple and yet very specific details, for example, the exact amount of money that might be given to a person of this social status and background, and the household items such as a scooter and fridge were extremely important individuating features for the character of Nandini in the book.

The Neelam Vishnoi interviews were crucial in another aspect. They gave me minute particulars of the kinds of murders that had been committed by the inhabitants of the prison. The culture of the prison, and the fact that every inmate had been convicted of homicide, was such that it had been difficult to press inmates on the individual details of their crimes. When visiting as a BBC film crew in 1998, we were encouraged to steer clear of the details. It was deemed too invasive, considering that the crimes had been committed many years previously, and were often quite gory. When I returned to the prison, as a writer, and not affiliated to the BBC, it was more difficult to gain access to the prison. I did not appear wearing the badge of an internationally respected broadcasting organization, and carry the weight of that kind of branding. I had to use my contacts at Penal Reform International to get security clearance for access. However, there was a new freedom in entering the place without a camera. As Ray notes in *The Village*, the camera irrevocably alters whatever it films, mostly by provoking a self-consciousness in the contributors

¹⁶ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.166.

who are being filmed.¹⁷ By interviewing Neelam verbally and informally, as we walked around the compound, I managed to get an insight into a number of crimes that had taken place in the village.

Even though I had no camera, my research process initially involved using the same skills I had acquired as an observational documentary filmmaker. I asked Neelam the ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘why’, ‘when’ and ‘how’ questions that form the mainstay of journalism. However, in returning as a fiction-writer rather than a BBC journalist, I found that I was interested in the wider ethical issues of living in the open camp, and in looking at the fault-lines of the place as well as the successful elements. For example, something that I discovered in this second trip was that the prison had changed in a crucial way: the doors were now open to female prisoners. In my discussions with Neelam I discovered that this development had brought new challenges. A condition of living at Sanganer prison has always been that the inmate must be reunited with his spouse and children and take responsibility for them by living with and providing for them. Unlike the male inmates, most female inmates convicted of homicide had no husband and children waiting for a reunion: the husband had remarried after the wife’s conviction, and absorbed the children into his new family. This culturally specific outcome meant that if female inmates were to be allowed into Sanganer, the rules would have to change. So as I walked around with Neelam on that trip I was particularly interested in the silhouettes of a couple of solitary female figures, alone in their huts, who were stitching or watching television. I found out the details of their crimes through oral interviews, took photographs with their permission, and documented the material in a series of notebooks.

It was startling to realise upon my return to these notebooks that in the first draft of the book I had not used this valuable detail. I had wanted to keep a sense of mystery around the crimes, and

¹⁷ One example: ‘These were the moments in which Ray was interested: the unconstructed, unattended moments of revelation. Sometimes she wished that she could film every scene, every person secretly. There was something honest about it. The camera changed everything – it altered the situation you were filming, got people on their best behaviour.’
Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.63.

in doing so, had denied the novel of one of the important aspects of the story for the reader: an understanding of the gravity of the crimes committed by the inmates. These characters in the novel, like their real-life counterparts, have killed someone, and are living in a prison without walls where they can pretty much come and go as they please. Not presenting the gravity of the crimes in the first draft was affecting the jeopardy of the story. I was in danger of treating the subject matter with the same nonchalance and naivety as my flawed central character, Ray.

I set to work upon using this material, which would become integral to the new style of the novel. To this end, I was inspired by an interview with Gabriel Garcia Marquez, from the *Paris Review*, in which he talks very eloquently about the simple power of specificity in oral storytelling, and how he harnessed this in his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*:

That's a journalistic trick which you can also apply to literature. For example, if you say that there are elephants flying in the sky, people are not going to believe you. But if you say that there are four hundred and twenty-five elephants flying in the sky, people will probably believe you. The problem for every writer is credibility. Anybody can write anything so long as it's believed.¹⁸

An example of a scene that uses this detail from oral interviews in the published version of *The Village* follows. This scene includes material gained from interviews with three different characters, merged for the fictional character of Ram Pyari and her story:

'Speak on' Nandini said, the tone of her voice full of assurance, as though she was referring to a contract between them that would not be broken..

Ram Pyari frowned.

'He had a friend. He would come over, drink with him.'

She touched her nose-ring, her eyes shifting away from Ray's gaze.

'He began to love me. I also loved him.'

Ray nodded, hoped her face reflected support.

'Didi has explained to me that it was not right, what happened.' She gestured at Nandini, for whom she was using the term 'Didi', older sister, as a form of respect, even though Nandini was probably younger than her.

'What happened?' said Ray, before she could stop herself. She had to know the end of the story.

'We gave him poison. They sat and drank together the whole night, the two of them, then we put mouse poison in his last drink.'

Ram Pyari looked over at Nandini, then spoke again with renewed strength.

¹⁸ Peter H. Stone (Interviewer), 'Gabriel Garcia Marquez: The Art of Fiction' *Paris Review* 169 (1981), p.33.

‘But it didn’t work. He was still moving. Then I found his knife, he used to keep a curved sword, his talwar.’

She looked at Ray, waiting for a reaction. Her eyes held an element of challenge in them. Can you take this they seemed to say.

Ray nodded. She was transfixed.

‘I cut him up into pieces and buried him under the earth of the house.’

She stared at Ray, her eyes wide open, moments of sunlight highlighting the amber flecks.

‘I felt very calm when I had done it. Didi knows.’

Ray looked back, deep into Ram Pyari’s eyes. She could feel the humidity in the hut, a feeling of suffocation in her breath. The thrill had gone, instead she felt a damp swathe of depression around her neck.

‘Is he here, in the same prison?’ Ray asked, breaking into English to address Nandini without realising it. ‘Her lover?’

Nandini shook her head.

‘He is in another prison,’ she said. ‘They write to each other. They’ve been writing to each other for almost ten years now. “My rose, life without you is unbearable.” That is the kind of thing Ram Pyari asks me to write to him. He writes back the same - he must be getting someone to read and decipher it for him too, write back. She sometimes says she would do it again, if she was given the chance. But at least she acknowledges that it happened now. When she first came here, she denied it, like many of them do. Only after many sessions did I convince her that I was not part of the police or the government, that she could talk to me.’¹⁹

In this scene, details like the mouse poison, the curved sword kept next to the bed, the cutting up of her husband into pieces and burying him under the house, and the letters between a woman who had killed her husband and her lover, both housed in separate prisons, all came from verbal interviews with Neelam Vishnoi, who had encountered these stories as part of her pastoral care at Sanganer Prison. The ghoulish quality of some of her stories would lead me to turn the Nandini character into a kind of Scheherazade figure – a portal into all the hidden stories of the village, shocking Ray with the specific details that make her accept that the stories are true.²⁰ In the piece above, she is the mediator of the story – she tells Ray about the aspects that do not come out through the interview with Ram Pyaari, albeit in front of Ram Pyaari herself. This role grew as the novel developed.

Jaipur manual workers: Interviews regarding the biographical details of their lives

As part of my initial research for the book, I had interviewed two local migrant workers in Jaipur who had come from Rajasthan villages. One woman I had seen ironing clothes on the side of the

¹⁹ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.40.

²⁰ Richard Burton, *The Arabian Nights: Tales from A Thousand and One Nights* (New York: Modern Library, June 1st, 2004), p.45.

road for local residents, and the other woman worked as a domestic cleaner. My interviews contained much useful information on the practical details of their lives, but in the first draft, this material was being presented in the ‘amorphous’ manner of life, mentioned by James Wood - as ‘notes’ written down by Ray – rather than the novel containing the important elements for us to ‘notice’.²¹ In the second draft, I isolated the most important details as I saw them and integrated them into the dialogue of the book, bringing them to the foreground. An example follows:

She was given a job in the village nearby, washing bottles for the pickle factory. But life was difficult. There was not enough to go around the joint family.

‘Dreams? If we had food to eat, that was enough.’

She had one outfit of clothes to cover her body. At night she would wash it, and hang it over the sticks so that it made a tent.

Then she would lie underneath it and sleep while it was drying, for modesty. In the morning, she wore it again.

Ray interrupted, her voice betraying genuine shock. ‘Just one set of clothes?’²²

This kind of fact (that a person might grow up owning only one set of clothes: washing it every night, and leaving it to dry to wear the next day) I found to be much more powerful if integrated into a scene of dialogue between two characters, with Ray being able to respond to it within the situation, rather than when presented as Ray’s notes (as I had done in the first draft). The latter had the effect of dehumanising the fact, rather than it being put to use to humanise and bring a character to life.

2. VIDEO INTERVIEWS

I had several video tapes of Sanganer prison village, from my first trip there as a BBC filmmaker in 1995. I returned to these tapes in search of the following details:

The physical details of the village

One of my editor’s notes on the first draft had been that the novel ‘could be set anywhere’²³. As explained above, this was down to an anxiety about cultural representation, authenticity, and the

²¹ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage, 2009), p.52.

²² Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.38.

²³ Mary Mount (email to the author, 9 Sept 2010) quoted with permission.

potential to be clichéd, on my part. To combat this, I looked closely at the videotapes, for physical details that could anchor the sense of place of the novel. One example would be the descriptive details of the huts on site, which I used in the final version of *The Village* as follows:

Ray sat on the other bed and checked her cellphone. There was no signal. She looked around. ‘A one room hut with outside latrine,’ was how it had been described to her on the phone, during the planning phase. It was an accurate description, but nothing had prepared her for simple details: the lack of glass in the windows - a series of holes in circles and hexagons, the size of her palm - likewise the absence of a lock on the ‘door’ - a curved sheet of metal that she pulled into place so that the gap at the join was as narrow as possible, just two or three inches.²⁴

The description of the windows, the fact that they contained no glass, and were a series of geometric holes in the wall, came directly from this re-examination of the filmed material. It was one of many details that would work to evoke the atmosphere and sense of place of the village that was missing in the first draft. Other examples include the utensils used by a boy washing himself outside one of the huts, and the animals nearby:

A bony teenaged boy washed himself in the front yard of one home, standing in his briefs and pouring water from a bucket over his head with a jug, both utensils made of thick plastic with a marble-effect swirl of pink and white. A huddle of five rabbits chewed on sparse leaves in a pile of branches near him.²⁵

Again, I found the cumulative use of simple details like the ‘marble-effect swirl’ of the jug, the number of rabbits, the leaves and branches, all of which were actually drawn from the video footage, to be extremely useful in enhancing the verisimilitude of the village in the first chapter.

Interpersonal dynamics of the crew and the inhabitants of the village

In the first draft, when I watched the original tapes of the BBC filmed footage from the prison, I looked for the style in which the film was shot, and the kinds of questions that the (British) interviewers would ask of the (Indian) interviewees. Upon returning to the footage, I looked at the interpersonal dynamics of the crew, including remarks that were being articulated off camera, the

²⁴ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.7.

²⁵ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.6.

interstitial elements that revealed much of the gender dynamics that would end up in the novel. An example of a key scene in the finished novel that was not in the first draft, follows:

One of the men laughed, muttered something she couldn't hear. There were more laughs.

'Hijra!' shouted one of them, uncertainly, with a high pitched voice, and as the laughter scurried around the group, a couple of them began to work again, whacking their axes into the rock and yet still continuing to turn and stare up at her. She brought the camera down and walked quickly out of vision.

'What does that mean?' said Serena as she got back in the car.

'What was he shouting?' said Jim. 'Hijar? Heejar?'

Ray caught Zafar's eye in the mirror, feeling the shame heat her face.

'Hijra,' said Ray, speaking with a determined clarity. 'A man who looks like a woman. They are ... considered eunuchs here. They can be transgender or transvestite, they make money dancing at weddings, or end up as prostitutes.'

She forced a laugh, to get in before them. She heard herself and winced.²⁶

In this scene, Ray crosses a boundary. She films without consent. It is a crucial scene in the published novel, as it demonstrates the early behaviour that will later have drastic consequences in the plot. This scene came out of watching the unedited rushes afresh, of the BBC footage, and discovering that I had performed a similar error. Like Ray in this final draft, I was called 'Hijra!' (meaning eunuch) as an insult, by the people I was filming. I did not use this footage in the final film as broadcast by the BBC, and had not paid much attention to it in my first assessment of the material. However, now that I was watching with a view to listening to the audio, and watching the images of the interstitial sections, (the unprofessional moments that were not for broadcast, and which I had previously dismissed), I heard the exchange of words for the first time.

Another example of a scene that I watched several times in this return to the BBC footage, (also a scene in which a boundary is presented for crossing or not, by the BBC crew), appears in the final version of the novel as follows:

It was the young girl in purple whom she had seen at the water pump. She was chopping vegetables in a kitchen, sitting on the floor and being filmed from above, Serena must have been standing. The vegetables around the girl bulged with heightened colours: vibrant mauve onions, and slender burgundy aubergines. She was talking to Serena as she peeled a mooli, a long overgrown white radish.

'Aap ko meri bhasha samaj mein aati hai ke nahin?' *Do you understand my language or not?*

²⁶ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.104.

She gave a wide smile, you could see her thinking as she awaited a response. She was getting ready to speak again. Serena's voice was apologetic, off camera.

'Sorry, I only speak English. Ray, my... Ray speaks Hindi. The Indian girl... with me? Ray Bhullar.'

Ray imagined Serena putting her hand on her chest and shaking her head as she spoke.

The girl spoke over her answer.

'*Take me to your country,*' she said, giving her a grin as she chopped the hairy white piece into small circles. '*Back with you I mean.*'

'Sorry,' said Serena, the frustration giving a crisp veneer to her voice. 'No Hindi. I bring Ray later. Hindi from Ray Bhullar.'

The girl picked up some thin green finger chillies and began to slit them in two. Her voice was placatory.

'Apka aacha dhyaan rakhti, mein,' she said, as if to explain herself, her tone suggesting that she had noble motives, that she didn't want Serena to miss out. *I would have looked after you well.*²⁷

In this case, the filmed scene I discovered was one that had been directed by a BBC colleague, in which she could not understand the person she was filming. This scene stopped when the character asked the non-Indian crew member if she would take her back with her to the UK. The BBC producer who was filming with a hand-held camera, could not understand her. I developed this miscommunication further, into a scene where Ray watches back the filmed material in the local hut, and feels very uneasy as she can understand the language, even though her colleague was unable to understand it at the time of filming.

Like the scene above, in the original footage, the girl was chopping vegetables, and casually suggested that the filmmaker might take her back to her 'own country'. Due to the nature of the request, the fixer with the BBC producer, chose not to translate the request, urging the contributor to quieten down instead, and then curtailing the filming of the scene. Upon watching back the tapes, I could understand everything in the scene, due to my ability to speak Hindi, and could see it all: the crossed wires, the true meaning of the girl's words, and the cover-up by the translator. This scene would lead to a whole new narrative thread in the final version of *The Village*, dealing with the hierarchy of language, and the power dynamics at play in translation.

²⁷ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.16.

To start with, at the most basic level, in the act of putting the words down on the page, I began to think about the way in which I would be presenting Hindi in the book: would I explain or translate each word? I asked myself whether italics were appropriate for the Hindi in the book, or whether there was an inherent hierarchy between the solid non-italicised font I was using for English, and the italicised version for Hindi – I did not want the latter to seem like a weakened relation of the former, for example. Eventually I settled upon a rhythm of writing that was similar to the translation style in *The Pickup* by Nadine Gordimer, incorporating italicised sections for Hindi without signposting them as such.²⁸ I worked to make sure that these sections did not jar, in order to keep the prose fluent, and with a view to making the reading experience coherent, so that the reader could absorb English and Hindi within the same paragraph without always noticing it.

I became interested in the theme of translation and looked at the Javier Marias book *A Heart So White* in which two world leaders are incorrectly translated so that the translators can achieve their own objectives.²⁹ The objectives are personal and political at once. The two translators want to flirt with each other, and they also want to curb the world leaders' desire for war. They achieve this through personal flattery. It is a wonderful scene, which uses the space between the utterance of a sentence, and its translation, to thrilling effect.

I took this device (of a deliberately false act of translation) and used it in the second half of *The Village*. It is a scene where Ray changes what is being said by the presenter, Nathan, in order to effect a sea change with the interviewee, getting him to reveal more and more of himself. It is just one of several instances in the novel, where Ray uses her knowledge of the local language, to manipulate a situation for her own needs.

In February 2013 I was asked to travel to Karachi Literature Festival with the British Council and take part in a number of translation workshops with local translators. Whilst there, I talked

²⁸ Nadine Gordimer, *The Pickup* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), p.15.

²⁹ Javier Marias, *A Heart So White*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (London: Harvill Press, 1996), pp.105-110.

about the way in which I used translation in *The Village*. There were also other outcomes of becoming interested in translation as a theme, and from watching the non-broadcast elements of the original BBC film. In particular, the detailed watching of the filmed material led to the use of script in the novel, which I did to explore the spoken word in the same spirit as Marias. I was particularly interested in the difference between the words that are spoken in public, and the private intent behind them. There are two scenes written as script in the final draft of the novel: firstly, the key interviewing scene, in which Ray is successful at making Nandini cry on camera, and secondly, the scene between Nathan and Ray involving drugs by the river.

3. INTEXTTEXTUAL RESEARCH

The second part of my research involved looking at the following texts for aspects of craft:

- a) *Winter in July* by DORIS LESSING
- b) *The Hunters* by JAMES SALTER
- c) *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* by DANIYAL Mueenuddin

The ensuing chapters of this thesis will look at each of these texts in detail.

CHAPTER 3

Doris Lessing

Little Tembi and the desire for difference

In June 2012, the poet and novelist Tishani Doshi (who lives and was raised in Chennai, South India) opened her review of *The Village* in the UK Guardian newspaper as follows:

Attempts to capture the 'real' India almost inevitably result in ill-tempered debates about authenticity. Recent trends would seem to indicate that western readers and filmgoers favour 'poor' exotica over 'rich' exotica: less *Jewel in the Crown*, more *Slumdog Millionaire*. Does the real India lie between these two extremes or within them, and if so, who has the right to tell the story? Into this debate steps Nikita Lalwani, author of the Booker-longlisted and Costa-shortlisted *Gifted*, with her ambitious and filmic second novel, *The Village*.³⁰

Indeed, having already written a novel about a family of Indian origin, living in the UK, I was aware of this responsibility of representation during the writing of *The Village*.³¹ I was particularly aware that the novel I was writing could be considered as part of the debate around perception, as Doshi puts it: 'who has the right to tell the story?'³² The critic E. Ann Kaplan has suggested that, 'like everything in culture, looking relations are determined by history, tradition, power hierarchies, politics, economics ... the possibilities for looking are carefully controlled ... looking is power'.³³ An important aspect to *The Village* is the exploration of these 'looking relations', and Ray's gradual

³⁰ Tishani Doshi, 'The Village by Nikita Lalwani - a review', *The Guardian*, Friday 22 June 2012
< <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/22/the-village-nikita-lalwani-review> > [accessed 14 July 2014], p.1.

³¹ Lalwani, Nikita, *Gifted* (London: Viking, 28 June 2007)

³² Tishani Doshi, 'The Village by Nikita Lalwani - a review', *The Guardian*, Friday 22 June 2012
< <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/22/the-village-nikita-lalwani-review> > [accessed 14 July 2014], p.1.

³³ Ann E Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.122.

realisation that she does not have the power to gaze upon the inhabitants of the prison, without being gazed upon in return.

Although Ray is of Indian origin, and can speak the language, she is still, ultimately, to be hated in the way that most western tourists are hated for their tremendous self-involvement and self-regard, a situation described acutely in Jamaica Kincaid's iconic essay *A Small Place*:

An ugly thing, that is. what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly, empty thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that and it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness (you do not look the way they look); the physical sight of you does not please them; you have bad manners (It is their custom to eat their food with their hands, you try eating their way, you look silly, you try eating the way you always eat, you look silly); they do not like the way you speak (you have an accent); they collapse helpless from laughter, mimicking the way they imagine you must look as you carry out some everyday bodily function. They do not like you.³⁴

It takes, in effect, the whole novel, for Ray to realise that the villagers 'do not like' her, even though she suspects it at many times, and continues her attempts to be accepted by the community, in spite of the tension that grows as her time living there continues. Language does not protect her, even though she uses spoken Hindi as an expression of her identity, and her skin colour and genetic makeup will not protect her either, even though she uses it to declare her Indian-ness:

'I am quite dark-skinned, wouldn't you say?' said Ray, unable to stop herself from trying again.

Jyoti raised her eyebrows and looked at Nandini, then back at Ray. She shrugged her shoulders.

'It means no one can call me white,' said Ray, smiling through her anger and presenting her arm again.³⁵

In addition to this narrative theme of gazing back and forth between subject and object, the question of the identity of my own authorial gaze was of crucial importance to me in the process of writing the novel. I asked myself the same question about authenticity that is summarized in Doshi's review at the start of this piece: how should I crystallise the idea of a 'real India', given that the country is constantly changing, and that I, the teller of the story, could be considered to come under the banner of an 'NRI' - a 'non-resident Indian' rather than someone 'authentic'? I was aware

³⁴ Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), p.17.

³⁵ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.112.

of the sharp words of critic Gayatri Spivak, who has commented on the problem of representing one version of India:

If literature is a vehicle of cultural self-representation, the "Indian cultural identity" projected by Indo-Anglian fiction, and more obliquely, poetry, can give little more than a hint of the seriousness and contemporaneity of the any "India"-s fragmentarily represented in the many Indian literatures.³⁶

With regard to my own authorial gaze, I also thought about Edward Said's formative text *Orientalism*, in which he quotes George Orwell on 'colonial subjects', and the desire of those people who are doing the colonising, to see the local inhabitants of Marrakech, for example, as one homogenous, alien mass of 'undifferentiated brown stuff':

When you walk through a town like this—two hundred thousand inhabitants, of whom at least twenty thousand own literally nothing except the rags they stand up in—when you see how the people live, and still more, how easily they die, it is always difficult to believe that you are walking among human beings. All colonial empires are in reality founded upon that fact. The people have brown faces—besides they have so many of them! Are they really the same flesh as yourself? Do they even have names? Or are they merely a kind of undifferentiated brown stuff, about as individual as bees or coral insects?³⁷

Of this, Said writes:

Aside from the picturesque characters offered European readers in the exotic fiction of minor writers (Pierre Loti, Marmaduke Pickthall, and the like), the non-European known to Europeans is precisely what Orwell says about him. He is either a figure of fun, or an atom in a vast collectivity designated in ordinary or cultivated discourse as an undifferentiated type called Oriental, African, yellow, brown, or Muslim. To such abstractions Orientalism had contributed its power of generalization, converting instances of a civilization into ideal bearers of its values, ideas, and positions, which in turn the Orientalists had found in "the Orient" and trans-formed into common cultural currency.³⁸

Said places the 'exotic' as a construct of the European storyteller - a form of individuation or particularity, in terms of character construction. Europeans form appealing, 'picturesque characters' who suit their needs in direct opposition to the other option available - Orwell's dehumanised mass of undifferentiated beings. Said also mentions the power of 'cultural currency' - an idea that was particularly valuable to me when writing *The Village*. I wanted to convey this sense of exotica as

³⁶ Gayatri Spivak, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (London: Routledge, 2013), p.239.

³⁷ George Orwell, 'Marrakech', *England, your England: and other essays*. (London: Secker & Warburg 1953), p. 45.

³⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1989, first ed. 1978), p.252.

being valuable in some way to Ray - as being more than just an idealised view of India and Indians, but rather more that portraying the village on camera as 'exotica' could have a currency for her and the crew, some utility - a value that feeds her need to maintain the idealised, exotic view of the people around her, betraying the 'European' quality of her gaze, even though she considers herself to be Indian.

In this sense, Ray is herself a meditation on the idea of having a postcolonial protagonist, and I use the word 'post-colonial' here, with reference to Graham Huggan's reappraisal of it, in his 2002 text *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. His analysis of Arundhati Roy's Booker prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* presents the book as a popular example of the 'commodification' of exotic archetypes:

Roy's novel shows the continuing presence of an imperial imaginary lurking behind Indian literature in English, among other putatively postcolonial products. But this imaginary is turned precisely to commerce, to a currency of nostalgic images; and these images; are held up derisively to the very readers they attract. Roy's, like Rushdie's, might be seen then as a strategic exoticism, designed to trap the unwary reader into complicity with the Orientalisms of which the novel so hauntingly relates.³⁹

Similarly, Talal Asad has argued that 'Modern world culture has no difficulty in accommodating unstable signs and domesticated exotica, so long as neither conflicts radically with systems of profit'.⁴⁰ In this sense, Ray's 'system of profit' would be the documentary film that she has to make for the BBC. The conflict in the novel comes when the people around her demonstrate that they are not within her control, and do indeed, conflict 'radically' with the system of profit that is the film, threatening her position on the programme, and her entire career.

Kate Teltscher cites the Turkish, Nobel prize winning novelist Orhan Pamuk's 'repeated assertions that he does not feel aggrieved' with regard to being viewed as 'exotic' as suggesting that Pamuk 'is concerned to differentiate his position from that of Said', linking the 'anger' of

³⁹ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the margins* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.77.

⁴⁰ T.Asad quoted by F.Said in 'The Discourse of Intercultural Translation', (*Intercultural Communication Studies XIII: 3* 2004), p.41.

Orientalism to the fact of having been previously colonised. Teltscher asserts that ‘the crucial point, for Pamuk, is that Istanbul was never subjected to colonial rule’.⁴¹

‘[T]hat is why’, Pamuk writes, ‘I am not so perturbed by the use Western travellers have made of my past and my history in the construction of the exotic. If Western travellers embroider Istanbul with illusions, fantasies about the East, there is in the end no harm done to Istanbul - we were never a Western colony.’⁴²

In the review of *The Village* quoted at the start of this section, Doshi mentions recent examples of Indian ‘exotica’, by referencing Paul Scott’s novel, *The Jewel in the Crown*, and *Slumdog Millionaire*, (an adaptation by British screenwriter Simon Beaufoy of a the novel *Q and A* by contemporary Indian writer Vikas Swarup who was raised in India and also works as a diplomat all over the world). This mixture of representations by authorial ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, in terms of nationality, makes for an interesting list in terms of coming back to the question of who has the ‘right’ to gaze upon the population of a country like India, and represent these inhabitants in a story that has the potential to be visible on the world stage - in the case of a hit film like *Slumdog Millionaire*, Beaufoy’s adaptation of Swarup’s novel ultimately reached billions of viewers worldwide.

If, as Orwell writes, ‘language corrupts thought’ as well as ‘thought’ having the power to corrupt language⁴³ then for a novelist like myself to write a novel like *The Village* in the English language, is to use a medium that has historically, absorbed the idea of the ‘exotic’ into its very DNA. How then, does one engage with the specifics of a situation, as a writer, when using this medium?

In his essay ‘The Location of Culture’, Homi Bhabha claims that perspective is an important aspect to cultural hierarchy in a text:

⁴¹ Kate Teltscher, ‘Reading Orientalism in Istanbul: Edward Said and Orhan Pamuk’, *Edward Said and the literary, social, and political world* (New York: Routledge, 2009 ed. Ranjan Ghosh), p. 113.

⁴² Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul* (New York:Random House LLC, 2006), p.372.

⁴³ George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* (London: Horizon, 1946), p.10.

The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization – the repetition that will not return as the same, the minus-in-origin that results in political and discursive strategies where adding to does not add up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification.⁴⁴

This idea of representing and reappraising things from the ‘perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization’ was an important one for me when honing the perspective from which the reader sees the story in *The Village*. I had a sense, upon reading Babha, that the perspective of the book would be more powerful if it contained diverse elements, rather than just one, that it would ‘disturb the calculation of power and knowledge’ which could be incredibly valuable to me as a writer. For this reason, perspective, in the specific sense of character's point of view - the way in which the events that take place in *The Village* are presented and viewed by the different characters in the book - is a significant aspect of the final novel.

An important writer for me in terms of research was Doris Lessing, a writer whose relationship with the idea of the exotic has always been deliberate and politicised. Lessing lived in Africa for several years, and the literature from her that came out of this time, has an understanding of that very consciousness. Indeed, she writes conscientiously through the optics of a colonial literature. Whilst writing *The Village*, I looked at her collection of African stories entitled *Winter in July*, particularly to understand the way in which she engages with the contradictions of the form.

James Gindin has written of how Lessing overtly condemns a particularly lazy liberalism demonstrated by certain westerners in Africa, through her tone in these stories, which is one of scorn:

Ms Lessing’s African fiction, like her other fiction, often shows her scorn for the half-hearted liberal, the aristocratic do-gooder who does not really commit himself to the down-trodden.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Homi K. Babha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 12 Oct 2012), p.32.

⁴⁵ James Gindin, ‘Doris Lessing’s Intense Commitment’, *Postwar British Fiction: New Accents and Attitudes* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), p.23.

This concept - of the danger of naive perception, of reductionist views due to the lukewarm level of engagement of a colonial 'do-gooder' – the power of the 'half-hearted liberal' to wreak great damage in a community was very important to me as I wrote *The Village*. I was particularly interested in the concept of the 'other' in Lessing's short story 'Little Tembi', in which Jane Maccluster, a nurse working in Africa, shows special interest in a local boy born to a servant in her house. When the boy grows up, and she has a guilty feeling about her involvement in his fate (she and her husband Willie will ultimately be responsible for sending him to prison), Willie responds to Jane's sobs by saying 'They don't think anything of prison. It isn't a disgrace as it is for us.'⁴⁶ This suggestion, that the British visitors consider themselves to be an entirely different species from the African locals also comes up in Lessing's short story 'The Nuisance' from the same collection, *Winter in July*, reminding us of Orwell's assertion that colonial empires can only exist because of this fact, quoted earlier.⁴⁷

Later, we talked about the thing, saying how odd it was that natives should commit suicide; it seemed almost like an impertinence, as if they were claiming to have the same delicate feelings as ours.⁴⁸

Unlike the white characters in Lessing's African fiction, who worry about delineating 'natives' as being 'different' from them, the central character in *The Village*, Ray Bhullar, is more concerned with being accepted fully as one of the 'natives' herself. Even though she was born and raised in the UK and has not visited India previously, she has a sense of pride at being of Indian origin through her bloodline, and is particularly proud of being able to speak Hindi, albeit in a slightly makeshift way. However, Ray's actions as we move through the story reveal that she embodies some of the contradictions of the 'liberal do-gooders' in Lessing. Jane McCluster in 'Little Tembi' for example, is quite proud of the fact that she is so amenable to helping 'natives',

⁴⁶ Doris Lessing, 'Little Tembi', *Winter in July* (London: Panther, 1966 reprinted 1974), p.85.

⁴⁷ George Orwell, 'Marrakech' in *England, your England: and other essays*. (London: Secker & Warburg 1953) p. 45.

⁴⁸ Doris Lessing, 'The Nuisance', *Winter in July* (London: Panther, 1966 reprinted 1974), p.35.

and has a complete lack of self awareness about her own condescending attitude towards them, delivered with great satire by Lessing:

[...] she liked nursing natives and explained her feeling in the words: 'They are just like children, and appreciate what you do for them.' So when she had taken a thorough, diagnosing kind of look at the farm natives, she exclaimed "Poor things!" and set about turning a dairy into a dispensary.⁴⁹

Although McCluster may have skills that will be of use in helping the local population, her endeavours are coloured harshly for us with her patronising comment that she sees the natives as being 'just like children'. In this light, her exclamation "Poor things!" is another example of her superior attitude, rather than an exclamation that signifies genuine empathy with the people of the country in which she lives. For much of the first part of *The Village*, Ray similarly lacks self-awareness about her own hierarchical approach to the people she intends to film at Ashwer, and is instead, leaning towards egoism: taken up with the idea of her own self in that environment.

This question over motive continues in 'Little Tembi', with regard to Jane McCluster and the good deeds she sees herself doing. She becomes known as 'The Good-Hearted One' within the community and locals gather at her door for medical attention, filling her with a 'sense of pride'. When Tembi is a young child, he falls seriously ill and is in danger of dying. It coincides with a period in Jane's life, when she has been told that however much she longs for a child of her own, she cannot have one for at least two years. She transfers this need to Tembi:

"This child is not going to die," she said to herself. "I won't let it! I won't let it!" It seemed to her that if she could pull Little Tembi through, the life of the child she herself wanted so badly would be granted her.⁵⁰

Again, her own sense of self is the most dominant aspect of her interaction with the people she is helping. Little Tembi becomes a pawn in her superstitious pact with some unknown deity - relevant and urgent because she feels for some reason that if she saves him, she will have her own

⁴⁹ Doris Lessing, 'Little Tembi', *Winter in July* (London: Panther, 1966 reprinted 1974), p.63.

⁵⁰ Doris Lessing, 'Little Tembi', *Winter in July* (London: Panther, 1966, repr. 1974), p.65.

child. In *The Village* we see Ray similarly view the concerns of people like Nandini, who are in genuine need of her help, through the prism of her own self-interest.

The Village was described in *The Independent* newspaper as a novel that enters ‘Joseph Conrad territory, showing lingering post-colonial prejudices and the catastrophic effect of Westerners going East with a specific mission in mind’.⁵¹

The tension between Ray’s own need to be seen as ‘Indian’ and the colonial aspects of the Western film crew ‘going East with a specific mission in mind’ form much of the forward momentum of the novel. I was interested in exploring the implications of Ray’s own otherness, her outward denial of this difference, and the elements of her belief structure regarding the Indians she meets in Ashwer.

Ray is hungry from the point of arrival, to live authentically, like the locals - it takes up much of her focus and attention. When she sees her hut for the first time and understands how basic it is, instead of causing her anxiety, it gives her ‘a little thrill’: she is excited by the idea of living in the same way as the locals:

It gave her a little thrill, the sparsity of the environment, the uneven bristle of the rope underneath her thighs and hips as she unlaced her trainers and sat cross-legged on the charpoy. Their hut was just like the others. It promised sincerity somehow, the chance of empathy with the people they would be filming.⁵²

This hope, that her chances of ‘sincerity’ and ‘empathy’ with the locals will be enhanced by sleeping on a rope charpoy, is an early example of how Ray actually sees herself as very distinct from the local population – she is ‘putting herself in character’ as it were, in order to make a more ‘empathetic film’. She does not, of course, realise this about herself though, and is susceptible to her own ‘method acting’ – she often witnesses herself from the outside in, wondering how it will

⁵¹ Kunal Dutta ‘The Village, by Nikita Lalwani: The panic of reporters with no story to tell’, *The Independent* (UK) 24 June 2012 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-village-by-nikita-lalwani7878489.html?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=t.co> [accessed 1 May 2014], p.1.

⁵² Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.9.

seem to others around her. In this sense, she is like the McClusters, in 'Little Tembi', who worry more about how they come across, than how they actually act:

The McClusters forgot Tembi. They were pleased to be able to forget him. They thought of themselves as good masters; they had a good name with their labourers for kindness and fair dealing; while the affair of Tembi left something hard and unassimilable in them, like a grain of sand in a mouthful of food.⁵³

This concept - that the visible, rather than invisible elements are the most important aspects of self-definition - that it is important how they are seen by the locals and other ex-pats, as it directly reflects upon their own idea of themselves so that they can think of themselves as 'good masters' (rather than responding to the tiny hard fact of the 'grain of sand' that is 'unassimilable' in them) is similar to the way in which Ray assesses her own self by taking into account the opinions of the people in the village.

For example, Ray maintains the idea that she is a vegetarian, in the village, along with the idea that she is teetotal. In her mind these two characteristics go hand in hand with other facets of being Indian:

Vegetarian meant that you were probably Hindu, one of the dominant majority, spiritually active or aspirational, unlikely to drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes, 'pure' in sexual practice (none outside marriage, relatively demure within marriage, heterosexual naturally). 'Non-veg' stood for an attitude that could only be termed licentious.⁵⁴

In reality, Ray consumes chicken when away from the prison confines, and takes drugs with Nathan, the presenter of the programme she is filming. She also explores the possibility of sexual involvement with him, after smoking *chaaris*, the solid opium he has obtained from the local village. Ray assumes that if the locals do not see something, it does not have significance. When a doctor treats her for food poisoning, she feels indignant at his implication that she may have consumed meat, wondering what it is about her public presentation that suggests she may not be a vegetarian:

'...but no non-veg?' he asked again.

⁵³ Doris Lessing, 'Little Tembi', *Winter in July* (London: Panther, 1966, repr. 1974), p.78.

⁵⁴ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.86.

She frowned momentarily, wondering why he would repeat the question, whether there was something particular about her demeanour that suggested this label.

‘No,’ she said irritably. ‘I am veg, as I said. Why do you ask?’⁵⁵

Ray thinks of ‘non-veg’ as a ‘label’ rather than part of her internal identity – a label that is important if visible, because it is a kind of calling card, rather than an expression of self. The doctor asks her not to take offence at his questions and Ray finally marvels at the fact that she has internalized the idea that she is vegetarian, and actually believes it herself:

His tone was admonitory, certain of the need to put things straight. She felt duly corrected, wondering suddenly at her own righteousness. It was easy enough then, to forget your own actions it seemed - her recent escapade at the dhaba was not something that had caused confusion, conflict in her mind when he’d asked the question.⁵⁶

Although Ray is able to ‘forget (her) own actions’ with ease, the locals are taking note of everything. In the climax of the novel, Nandini explodes Ray’s hypocrisy, infuriated by her arrogance in thinking that her activities would go unnoticed:

‘I know all about you’ said Nandini. ‘The guards have told me about your leisure activities. Degenerate. Sick people you are. All these drugs you smoke together, they say, you all sleep in each others beds, roll around with each other on these river banks at night after getting intoxicated. It disgusts me, how I listened to you, how you portrayed yourself as an *Indian girl*’.⁵⁷

The fake and highly public rejection of meat eating causes Nandini particular anger, causing her to accuse Ray of ‘superiority’ in her gaze upon the inhabitants of the village:

‘They even say the driver took you to eat meat secretly, alone. What, you had to hide even that? As if people don’t eat meat here? Who do you think you are? How dare you treat us with such superiority? Who are you people?’⁵⁸

Nandini’s consternation at Ray’s hypocrisy is understandable – she might well ask why Ray thinks that ‘people don’t eat meat here?’ given that she and Ray have filmed Jyoti, one of the inhabitants of the prison, preparing a chicken for dinner, for Ray’s documentary. She knows that Ray has seen that meat is part of life there in Ashwer, so why pretend? In the scene in question,

⁵⁵ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.171.

⁵⁶ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.172.

⁵⁷ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.228.

⁵⁸ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.112.

where Jyoti talks about the chicken she is cooking being something that is reserved for a special occasion due to cost, Ray's presentation of herself as a vegetarian is part of her blind commitment to her own idea of an 'Indian girl', and inability to let the facts before her change that idea. When Jyoti comments off-camera to Nandini that as far as she is concerned, Ray is 'white' ('when you are around it long enough then colour sticks, doesn't it Didi?') Ray's response is noticeably unprofessional:

Ray stopped recording and held the camera in her right hand. She held out her left arm and spoke, forcing humour into her voice, directing it at Jyoti.

'Actually I am quite dark-skinned for a girl from North India, Didi, isn't it true to say?' She gestured at her arm.

Nandini opened her mouth to intervene, but Ray raised a hand to quieten her. A flicker of a palm up for a second, then back at her side.

'Didi, talk to me!' said Ray, a forced lightness at odds with the request in her voice.

'What do you think?'

There was a silence for a few beats.

'Didi?' said Ray.

'Speak,' said Jyoti, turning from her work-top. 'Who is saying I am not speaking. Say what you want.'

'I am quite dark-skinned, wouldn't you say?' said Ray, unable to stop herself from trying again.

Jyoti raised her eyebrows and looked at Nandini, then back at Ray. She shrugged her shoulders.

'Means, no-one can call me white,' said Ray, smiling through her anger and presenting her arm again.⁵⁹

Ray has taken offence to Jyoti's comment that she is 'white' and sees it as an insult. Her reaction (to attempt to force the person she is filming to agree that she has dark skin) does not endear her to Jyoti, who becomes defensive of her right to operate on her own terms instead of jumping to attention when Ray demands it: 'Who is saying I am not speaking. Say what you want.'⁶⁰ Jyoti feels entitled to her opinion, but the balance of power is complicated by the fact that Ray is filming her by collaborating with the Governor of the prison. Jyoti does not really have any choice in whether she is filmed or not.

Ray links her identity to colour, but Jyoti disregards it. To quote iconic postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak from an interview in Indian newspaper 'The Hindu' in 2011, Ray has manufactured

⁵⁹ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.112.

⁶⁰ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.112.

a self-regarding stereotype for herself as a non-resident Indian, which is entirely uninteresting to the Indian people around her:

I don't know how a person actually thinks an identity... I am truly not very concerned about questioning myself about my identity and so on, so I can't give you a fully-fledged answer to this question. I think one manufactures a stereotype for oneself and I don't think that's a very interesting thing, one's own stereotype about oneself, so I don't spend very much time thinking about it.⁶¹

In 'Not about the Colour Problem', Eileen Manion argues that Lessing's African stories need to be viewed in the context of Lessing's 'effort to portray the ways any hierarchical social order induces individuals to internalize its logic of domination and to invent characters who can transcend received ideas and imposed limitations.'⁶²

And indeed, this resistance to the established way of keeping to one's place within a hierarchical order is a common theme in Lessing's collection of African stories. With Ray, I wanted to take this idea, and explore the dangers of denying this hierarchical order. It suits Ray to be seen as Indian, because in the world of documentary making, the closer you can get to a community, the better the film. In reality, this is Ray's first trip to India, and her idea of India is one that has come from the media itself. An early comment from Ray when she arrives in Ashwer is that it reminds her of the Indian villages she has seen on television, and the images that she has used for her pitch for the programme:

She was surprised by the harmony and calm of the scene before her, even if it did fulfil her expectations - adhering to the descriptions she'd fashioned for the programme pitch back in London... She mistrusted the sense of familiarity, and yet, it did feel how she'd imagined.⁶³

Although she 'mistrusts' it, Ray never quite ditches this idea of the 'exotic' India during her stay at Ashwer. Instead, she continually attempts to make the idea fit her experience, rather than

⁶¹ Bulan Lahiri, 'In Conversation. Speaking to Spivak', *The Hindu*, 6 February 2011 <<http://www.thehindu.com/books/in-conversation-speaking-to-spivak/article1159208.ece>> [accessed 1 October 2014], p.1.

⁶² Eileen Manion, 'Not About the Colour Problem: Doris Lessing's portrayal of the Colonial Order', *World Literature Written in English* 21.3 (Autumn 1982), pp. 434-55.

⁶³ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.5.

allowing her experience to gradually build up a picture of the country she is inhabiting. When one of the guards blackmails her, asking her for a 'tip' in order to keep quiet about her drug fuelled activities with Jim, she is 'sickened by the intensity of his eyes.'⁶⁴ It is easier to empathise with him once he leaves the hut, when the need in his eyes is not so uncomfortably close to her, and when she can observe him from a distance, as part of the 'rural idyll'.

Why not, she thought, looking at the notes remaining in her purse. Who could blame him for trying to get some of this cash, there was so much of it here, compared to his probable monthly salary? She watched him walk away, down the dirt track towards the water pump, stopping by a gathering of kids in uniform, collecting for the walk to school near a few stacks of wooden food crates, empty, piled in a tower that came up to his head. He ruffled his hand through the youngest child's hair, teasing the others.⁶⁵

Once he is at a distance, and lacks threat, Ray is able to berate herself for her actions: 'She was repelled by her own actions, not his. She imagined the Governor's reaction to their deeds thus far - the respected 'BBC crew' - their swollen, perverse presence here in this village.'⁶⁶

Although is she is still concerned with what has been seen, and how it might be viewed by the Governor, rather than the effects of her actual actions on the village around her, in thinking about the man's wages Ray demonstrates an understanding of the inequality between the two of them and some empathy for his situation. In being part of a post-colonial story rather than a colonial one, I wanted Ray to have a more nuanced relationship with the people around her than the women in Lessing's African stories (Ray wants to be seen as 'one of them', even though her actions suggest otherwise). However, Jane McCluster in 'Little Tembi' and Ray share the same discomfort and guilt when looking into the eyes of the 'native' who is in need (even though Jane is 'white' and Ray is 'brown'): 'There stood Tembi before them, his hands dangling empty at his sides. He had

⁶⁴ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.164.

⁶⁵ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.165.

⁶⁶ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.165.

grown taller but still seemed the same lithe, narrow child, with the thin face, and great eloquent eyes. At the sight of those eyes, Jane said weakly “Willie...”⁶⁷

Jane tells Tembi to run away, causing her husband to run back to stop him. However, there is no need to run, as Tembi is not going to run away:

There stood Tembi, exactly where they had left him, his fists in his eyes, like a small child.

‘I told you to run away’, said Jane angrily.

‘He’s nuts,’ said Willie.⁶⁸

Like Ray with Jyoti in the scene where she demands a retraction of the word ‘white’, when confronted with ‘natives’ who will not act as requested, Jane reacts with anger: “‘I told you to run away,’” said Jane angrily.’ If only he would run away and Jane could assuage some of her guilt at his needs. The reason that Tembi does not run away is not made explicit. Tembi has nowhere to run – no real home or sense of belonging. If anything, he would like to ‘belong’ to them maybe: to Jane and Willie – somehow be part of their lives. What he wants is impossible because Jane and Willie see him as other than them-selves in quite a fundamental sense. Gindin notes that it is Jane’s half-hearted approach to Tembi that means she ultimately betrays the person she ‘tries to help’. I would argue that she is half-hearted because she doesn’t think that he is made of the same stuff as her, it would be an ‘impertinence’ for the ‘natives’ to see her in that way:

The boy is unable to accept his position in the black society, and yet he is not, despite special favors, allowed full equality with the whites. His ambivalent position destroys him, while the kindhearted white woman sits by wondering what has happened.⁶⁹

However, Tembi remains the ‘hard’, ‘unassimilable’, ‘grain of sand’ in the mouths of Jane and Willie – he will not make things easy for them by conforming to their ideas about ‘natives’. His motivation in stealing the goods is unexplained, which makes him very frustrating to Jane. He

⁶⁷ Doris Lessing, ‘Little Tembi’, *Winter in July* (London: Panther, 1966, reprinted 1974) p.86.

⁶⁸ Doris Lessing, ‘Little Tembi’, *Winter in July* (London: Panther, 1966, reprinted 1974) p.86.

⁶⁹ James Gindin ‘Doris Lessing’s Intense Commitment’ *Postwar British Fiction: New Accents and Attitudes*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), p.25.

cannot be boxed neatly as a 'bad' native. In the final line of the story she asks a question without answer, which shows her terrible lack of understanding of the people in the country she inhabits: 'What did he want, Willie?' What is it he was wanting, all this time?'⁷⁰

Kathleen Fishburne has delineated 'the strict division' in Lessing's novel 'The Grass is Singing' between the 'white settlers' (as Self) and the African natives (as Other)⁷¹ In writing the character of Ray, I sought to explore this distinction in a more complicated contemporary paradigm: one where the main character was of Indian origin, but had been raised in the UK. In a review for the UK Observer newspaper, Chris Cox summarised the novel as follows: '*The Village* is not just about media ethics – it also explores stubborn postcolonial prejudices, and ultimately asks what it means to represent something "real"'⁷²

One might ask whether *The Village* conforms to Sarah Brouillette's definition of the most marketable postcolonial fiction:

...it is English-language fiction; it is relatively 'sophisticated' or 'complex' and often anti-realist; it is politically liberal and suspicious of nationalism; it uses a language of exile, hybridity, and 'mongrel' subjectivity'.⁷³

I would argue that is a very different novel from the kinds of books tagged as postcolonial by Brouillette, due to the fact that Ray is a British Indian character, whom we only ever see in a village in India. Although Ray sees herself as Indian, her own 'stubborn postcolonial prejudices' mean that she retains a fixed idea about India. Unlike her colleague Serena, who is more openly judgmental of Indians in general (towards the end of the novel she lambasts Ray for defending people who 'drown their girls at birth, like kittens in this country'⁷⁴), Ray is in denial of her own viewpoint when it comes to the Indians around her. In this sense, to return to the idea of Lessing's

⁷⁰ Doris Lessing, 'Little Tembi', *Winter in July* (London: Panther, 1966 reprinted 1974), p.86.

⁷¹ Kathleen Fishburne, 'The Manichean Allegories of Doris Lessing's "The Grass Is Singing"', *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Winter, 1994, Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p.15.

⁷² Chris Cox, 'The Village by Nikita Lalwani - review', *The Observer* (UK), 17 June 2012
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/17/the-village-nikita-lalwani-review>> [accessed 10 March 2014]

⁷³ Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 61.

⁷⁴ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.200.

‘half-hearted liberal do-gooder’, she is more dangerous, as she does not acknowledge a dividing line between herself and the locals.

Reading Lessing with this in mind threw up crucial avenues of exploration for me, and meant that I dealt with the criticism of lack of context in my editor’s feedback to the first draft of *The Village* (‘this could be set anywhere’) by fully engaging with the idea of India presented in the novel by Ray and others, and using it to explore the postcolonial aspects of the activities of the documentary film crew as a whole. Lessing is concerned with the difference between the self-image of a ‘do-gooder’ who stages interventions into a local community, and the image that we piece together once we are confronted as readers with the reality of that person’s actions. In this sense, *Winter in July* is a very sophisticated piece of satire, and one that engages unflinchingly with the unreliability that is endemic within the colonial society presented in the text. Lessing does not spare herself from this searchlight that reveals unreliability, when it comes to self-knowledge. In *African Laughter*, she describes her difficulty in accepting that she would have to leave Southern Rhodesia as a young woman as a sign of immaturity: ‘Now I see that refusal, that inability to ‘take in’ my exclusion as a symptom of innate babyishness: mine, and too, the inhabitants of privileged countries’.⁷⁵ The understanding of the self, for Lessing brings an understanding that ‘inside our skins we are not made of a uniform and evenly distributed substance... but rather accommodate several mutually unfriendly entities’.⁷⁶ Lessing is inspirational to me for the fearlessness of her observational powers, demonstrated by this quote. In studying her work, I was able to tackle the complexity of my own relationship to India, as a writer: a relationship that was preventing me from writing about the country, due to a heightened sense of political correctness. I will continue this exploration of unreliability, specifically with regard to point of view, in the next chapter.

⁷⁵ Doris Lessing, *African Stories* (New York: Harper Collins UK, 28 Jun 2012), p.94.

⁷⁶ Doris Lessing, *African Stories* (New York: Harper Collins UK, 28 Jun 2012), p.95.

CHAPTER 4

James Salter

A mirrored perspective: implied narrators in *The Hunters*

The first line of the final draft of *The Village* is written as follows: ‘The security men are watching Ray.’⁷⁷ In fact, this line and the ensuing first pages are very different in tone and content from the first line of the first draft of *The Village*, originally written in this way: ‘The light was moving across the compound, a pale honey colour, warming the winter air.’

Writing the new opening line signified a definitive change in the aesthetic of the novel for me. This was a change that took place during the process of rewriting the book with a view to establishing an important trope of surveillance in the novel: the idea that people in the novel are watching each other like cameras, whenever they gaze upon each other. As the writer Christopher

⁷⁷ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village FIRST DRAFT*, (unpublished), p. 2.

Isherwood puts it 'I am a camera, with its shutter open.'⁷⁸ This is a line that Ray references later on in *The Village* upon watching Nandini cry during an intimate moment, and wishing that she could film it: 'Ray was silent. Without realising it, she mentally zoomed in on Nandini's face and refocused the shot. *I am like a camera, with my shutter open.* She heard the internal narrator, harsh and unwelcome in her head: *Bingo. It's a money shot.*'⁷⁹

This idea of each gaze being a camera had important implications for the point of view presented in the novel, and as part of my research into how to create it effectively I looked closely at the work of writer James Salter. In his novel *The Hunters*, Salter depicts a protagonist with an urgent search for meaning, a desire to find a way to live authentically, to be something memorable in the world. Ray Bhullar in *The Village* shares this existential concern, and for her, the search occurs through the lens of a camera.

In the first line, 'The security men are watching Ray', presents a visual transaction between the person who is considered to be the observer and the person who is seemingly being observed. In this first line, the ensuing first paragraph, and ultimately in the whole of the novel, Ray can be considered to be of both parties. She is watching the security men watch her. She is 'looking up and back at the three of them, every minute or so, a reflex that she is unable to control.' She does this whilst unpacking the camera kit, the equipment that will be crucial to her ability to observe the inhabitants of the village for the duration of her stay, under the privileged vanguard of the BBC. The ability to watch someone else indicates a level of power, and so in this first scene, although she wants to stop the transaction, she delays, hoping that the guards will be the ones to tire first:

She looks to see if they are still staring, hoping that they might now be bored of it. She remains in dialogue with them like this, brief flickers of acknowledgement, collisions of sight, that are barely noticeable, until she can do it no longer. She takes the kit back into the hut.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ The full quote is as follows: 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.'
Christopher. Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*. (Vol. 1237 New York: New Directions Publishing, 2012.), p.3.

⁷⁹ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.144.

⁸⁰ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.2.

This stand-off between Ray and the village inhabitants (who will tire of watching the other first?) is an important source of tension throughout the novel, building to climactic scenes, in which two villagers, Nandini and Jyoti, demand that Ray stop observing them. Similarly, as mentioned in the previous chapter, although Ray believes that some of her more ‘licentious’ behaviour can be hidden from the locals, the truth is that they have been watching her and noting pretty much everything that she does, possibly even down to the sound of her ‘loose motions’ in the outdoor toilet on the grounds. This discovery in particular makes her question her own perceptions, although as a person who relies upon successful invasions of privacy herself, she can’t help but be ‘impressed’:

‘What, yaar, I heard you got ill. So quickly?’ He winked at her, a momentary crinkle of warmth in his face.

‘How did you know that?’ said Ray. ‘Wow.’

She was genuinely impressed. She realised it was absurd to assume that only she was observing and reporting, when she was obviously under constant surveillance herself. Had it come from the security guards? She had a quick flashback to her daily trips to the toilet next to the hut, crouched over the cloistered hole in the earth as the waste tumbled out of her, the quiet moans. Had someone heard her?⁸¹

The interplay of perception: between the urgent internal need of a character, (displayed by being in that character’s point of view) and the implied viewpoint of an external narrator by gauging the reactions of those people watching the character in question, is something that has always interested me in the work of writer James Salter. In an article in the *London Review of Books* in 2013, James Meek argues that Salter broadens our reading experience with his use of perspective and point of view, which goes beyond the popular contemporary ‘single-perspective free indirect speech approach ‘that can easily ‘slip into a solipsistic, narrow worldview, a crude vehicle for the artist’s autobiography, grudges and obsessions’.⁸² Instead, Salter gives us something very interesting – a series of mirrors back on to the central character, reflections that cause us to question the character’s perception of his or her self:

From the beginning Salter sought a wider range of viewpoints, giving us the world as seen from the perspective of many characters, and

⁸¹ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.85.

⁸² James Meek, ‘Memories we get to keep’, *London Review of Books*, 20 June 2013, p.3.

from the perspective of implied narrators who stand at various distances from the author and characters. He attenuates the moral judgments of the classical 19th-century narrator without eliminating them entirely.⁸³

The concept of an ‘implied author’ is mentioned in the 1961 text *The Rhetoric of Fiction* by Wayne C. Booth, where he states that ‘Our sense of the implied author includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters. It includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole’.⁸⁴ Meek takes this further by suggesting that a narrator is present in Salter’s writing, whilst in and amongst the close point of view of a character. This stylistic device, as gleaned from examining Salter’s short stories and novels, was extremely important to me in writing the second draft of *The Village*.

Meek goes on to cite a useful example of this ambiguity of perception in Salter’s novel ‘The Hunters’, a description of ‘good bad pilot Archie (Abbott) who is coming to be seen as a coward and a failure’:

Suddenly, though, the past was being counted as nothing, like rescinded currency. What he had had for so long, what he had grown old in possession of, was gone now, sickeningly, and there was nothing else of importance to him, as with men who have given their lives to their children.⁸⁵

Meek writes of these lines:

It works. But the location of the point of view is not clear. Is it Abbott’s own self-awareness we are reading? Is it the view of Connell, whom he is with? Is it a detached, authoritative, implied narrator?⁸⁶

This multiplicity of possibility when it comes to perspective is one that I used regularly in *The Village* to similarly broaden the point of view beyond that of Ray’s free indirect thought patterns, and present the wider implications of her actions. At the end of the first third of the novel, when Ray makes one of her first invasions of privacy (filming a valley of men working in a quarry,

⁸³ James Meek, ‘Memories we get to keep’ *London Review of Books*, 20 June 2013, p.2.

⁸⁴ Booth, Wayne C., *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, University of Chicago Press 1983, p. 73.

⁸⁵ James Salter, *The Hunters* (Washington D.C., Counterpoint Press, 1 Sep 2012), p.75.

⁸⁶ James Meek, ‘Memories we get to keep’, *London Review of Books*, 20 June 2013, p.4.

without asking them), she is once again unable to stop watching them watch her. To relinquish and stop filming them would be ‘too humiliating’:

She should have asked their permission, she knew that, it was the basic ruling of ethical documentary practice, and she had already been called on this by Nandini, from the first day in the prison. She should have asked them if she could film them. Of course. It was beyond question. And yet she hadn't. She had been too nervous to go over and try to explain in her hesitant Hindi, found it too daunting to be an Indian woman alone, confronting a valley of men, too anxious and self-regarding was the truth of it, and so she hadn't even asked. Fear was not a good enough reason. She had treated them like animals in the ground for some natural history film. Her cheeks burned as she counted to herself. Thirty seconds and I'll stop, she thought, putting her weight over on to one leg as she continued to film. I have to keep going. They stared back at her, stared right into the lens.⁸⁷

Like the scene cited by Meek from *The Hunters*, there is an ambiguity around whether the judgments being made of Ray (the fact that asking permission was a ‘basic ruling of documentary practice’ that she is ‘too anxious and self-regarding’, and that she has treated them like ‘animals’) come from her own self awareness, whether they are the implied judgments of the men watching her, or are from what Meek calls a ‘detached, authoritative, implied narrator’. The passage provides us with the possibility of a mixture of all three viewpoints. At the end of the passage, the fact that the men stare ‘back at her... right into the lens’ reminds us that they are watching and assessing her, even as we are supposedly ‘with’ her, following her thought patterns, in her point of view.

This impasse of two-way staring with the men in the valley is more serious than the one Ray creates with the security guards in the first paragraph of the novel. In this case, it angers the local workers, and renders the material she is filming useless. Ray knows she will be unable to use the footage, as they are staring ‘right into the lens’, rather than going about their work as though they are unobserved, fulfilling the stylistic conventions of television. Still, she cannot put the camera down – she wants to show them that she will not relent first, (mirroring her initial inability to look away from the security guards at the start). Eventually the men shout ‘Hijra!’ at her - ‘Eunuch!’- an insult that forces her to leave.

⁸⁷ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.103.

The question of the reliability of Ray's apparent self-awareness, and self-perception is very important in this scene and others in the novel, in terms of presenting Ray's view of events as questionable as the book progresses. Although she is upset by the outcome of the scene in the quarry, and relays that discomfort to the reader, for all her ethical deliberations and self doubt, Ray's fantasy of the most 'truthful' filming experience involves exactly this kind of approach – the ability to film a subject without his or her knowledge. :

(It) seemed to her to be the most intrusive and perfect way to record a situation authentically - to look at someone, through a camera at eye level, which they couldn't see, to speak to someone in this way, or watch them, document the emotion in their facial expressions, free from the anxiety of being recorded.⁸⁸

In the seminal essay *Narrative Discourse - An Essay in Method*, Gerard Genette argues that although the perspective gained through the use of a restrictive point of view is 'of all the questions having to do with narrative technique, the one that has been most frequently studied since the end of the nineteenth century', the term 'point of view' is still one that is subject to confusion.⁸⁹

However, to my mind most of the theoretical works on this subject (which are mainly classifications) suffer from a regrettable confusion between what I call here mood and voice, a confusion between the question who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective? And the very different question who is the narrator? or more simply the question who sees? and the question who speaks?⁹⁰

Genet goes on to offer the word 'focalisation' as a new alternative to the current vocabulary, which he deems to be too visual:

To avoid the too specifically visual connotations of the terms vision, field, and point of view, I will take up here the slightly more abstract term focalisation which corresponds, besides, to Brooks and Warren's expression, 'focus of narration'.⁹¹

The term 'focalisation' has since been redefined and clarified by Genette and others, including Monika Fludernik, who has suggested that the focaliser can become the 'lens' for a story. The narrative is 'put across to the reader through the filter of the focaliser's thoughts and

⁸⁸ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.65.

⁸⁹ Gerard Genette, *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*, trans. by Jane.E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980), p.189.

⁹⁰ Gerard Genette, *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*, trans. by Jane.E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980), p.185.

⁹¹ Gerard Genette, *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*, trans. by Jane.E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980), p.185.

perceptions'. Such a character in a novel has a camera in her/his mind so to speak.⁹² Fludernik cites Stanzel's theory of the novel, in which he calls these focalising characters, with cameras in their minds 'reflector figures', 'since they "reflect" the story to the reader rather than telling it to them as a narrator persona would.'⁹³

In creating Ray, I wished to intensify this aspect of her role as key focaliser/ lens of the story and double up the way in which it works so that there are in effect, two answers to Genette's question: who sees? Ray is much more than one of Stanzel's 'reflector figures': not only does Ray have a 'camera in her mind' because she is the person presenting the story to us, she also has a 'camera in her mind' because she views most of the people in the village, and their activities as potential scenes to be filmed with an actual digital video camera. In this sense, there are two levels of mediation for the reader - the story, as filtered through Ray's personal perspective, and the story that she filters for herself, in preparation for the documentary that she wants to film.

Tania James claims in the *New York Times* that the search for truth in *The Village* is intimately bound up with judgement (from the filmmakers and the villagers alike):

The Village is not so much a portrait of a village, but a hard look at the quest for the true and the real — specifically in the realm of ethnographic film — and the misinterpretations that can arise along the way. While Ray and Serena mold their subjects, the same subjects, in turn, mold their own scathing, simplified opinions of the filmmakers.⁹⁴

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is also an important difference between the presentation of self that Ray attempts when we see her in public (vegetarian, celibate, teetotal), and the person she reveals herself to be when she imagines her actions are hidden, away from the gaze of the villagers (chicken-eating, 'licentious', drug-taking). The disparity between the two types of focaliser, 'public Ray' versus 'private Ray' creates a question around Ray's reliability for the reader.

⁹² Monika Fludernik, *Introduction to Narratology* (London/New York: Routledge, 2009), p.36.

⁹³ Monika Fludernik, *Introduction to Narratology* (London/New York: Routledge, 2009), p.36.

⁹⁴ Tania James 'Through a lens darkly', *New York Times* (9 August, 2013), p.14.

James Wood argues that even so-called unreliable narrators are usually ‘reliably unreliable’:

We know that the narrator is being unreliable because the author is alerting us, through reliable manipulation, to that narrator's unreliability. A process of authorial flagging is going on; the novel teaches us how to read its narrator.⁹⁵

The Hunters was of particular interest to me on this issue, as Salter's ‘authorial flagging’ - his suggestions that the focaliser's version of events are to be questioned - are very subtle. At times they are so subtle that the reader questions whether they are even there. For example, in a scene where the central character Cleve describes bathing with a fellow pilot at a brothel where they have both spent the night, his description seems initially straightforward:

Cleve glanced briefly at him lolling in the bath, the water up to his neck and his eyes closed. When he looked back in the mirror, everything had changed somehow. The passionate moments had passed. It was as if the harsh light of day had suddenly fallen full on them.⁹⁶

The fact that his companion is ‘lolling’ with the water up to his neck and his eyes closed, corroborates the idea that the glamour has gone from the night, and now the ‘harsh light’ of day, without mercy, reveals their night with two Japanese prostitutes to be sordid, rather than majestic, as it had seemed a few paragraphs earlier, when Cleve described the two of them as ‘kings... sharing the riches of empire together.’

However, the next two lines of description run as follows: ‘The girls attended them until they were dressed and ready to leave. They seemed to share a regret that it was over with.’⁹⁷

Even though the two girls are prostitutes, for whom sleeping with American soldiers could very likely be a routine occurrence at that time, we are being told that they ‘seemed to share a regret that it was over with.’ Someone is suggesting that the two women have had an experience with the two men that they would like to continue, but who exactly is suggesting this? It is not clear whether it is Cleve, or one of Meek's ‘implied narrators’, set back at a distance from the scene. The use of

⁹⁵ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage 2009), p.7.

⁹⁶ James Salter, *The Hunters* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint Press 2012 first ed. 1956), p.117.

⁹⁷ James Salter, *The Hunters* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint Press 2012 first ed. 1956), p.117.

the word casts doubt as to whether the girls are sharing the regret or not, they simply ‘seem’ to do so - it is a question of perspective. Can we really believe that they regret that the night is over? The question is subtle, but it is there. The passage continues with dialogue:

‘You rear gentreman,’ Cleve’s said to him hesitantly.

‘We’re no gentlemen.’

‘Yes, yes, you are.’

‘No.’

She smiled. She seemed very small now, and young.⁹⁸

There is more doubt cast upon the interpretation of events that we are to make as readers. She insists upon using deferential language, in referring to Cleve as a gentleman, but does so ‘hesitantly’. Are we to infer from this that she is hesitant because she is intimidated by his status, or because she is awkwardly trying to express her true feelings? What would Cleve have us believe? Can we trust him to get it right, or do we need to make a judgement on this ourselves? The word ‘seemed’ is used again, except now it is to tell us that she ‘seemed very small now, and young.’ Does her apparent youth mean that she is too innocent to lie, and that this intimation of ‘regret’ that their time in bed is over is sincere? Or does her youth mean that she will do anything to please him, including presenting herself as regretful? Ultimately, the lack of bespoke guidance from Salter means that the reader is forced to take an ethical stance with regard to the story being told. The reader can no longer passively accept the interpretation of the story, and by being active in the decision-making process around whether or not a prostitute would have enjoyed her night with Cleve, is forced into an awkward process of conjecturing based on his or her own world view.

Wolfgang Iser in explaining his theory of an implied reader suggests that ‘the distance between the story and the reader must at times be made to disappear, so that the privileged spectator

⁹⁸ James Salter, *The Hunters* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint Press 2012 first ed. 1956), p.117.

can be made into an actor.’⁹⁹ I was very keen to harness Salter’s approach of making the reader complicit and therefore active, when it comes to interpreting the ethics of the story that is presented in *The Village*. I did this mainly by creating uncertainty around Ray’s view of the villagers, so that the reader is forced to engage and make a decision as to whether or not she is reliable, as the novel goes on. Like Cleve, she is not always certain of her own judgement of the villagers, they ‘seem’ to be watching her with particular opinions, possible hostility but she cannot be sure as her assessment is subjective. During one of her walks through the compound, she attempts to analyse the villagers who stare at her:

His friend looked up. When he saw Ray, he made eye contact with his partner briefly. An understanding of some sort passed between them; she couldn’t work it out, but she could definitely see distaste of some sort moulding his expression. Without warning, he spat to the side of the table, taking care to avoid the material of his white dhoti. He stared back at her, holding his cards down against the table, as if to suggest that he would not continue with his game until she had passed.¹⁰⁰

The reader has been alerted to the unreliability of Ray by now, and so even though she tells us she can see ‘distaste of some sort moulding his expression’, we hunt for our own clues as to the truth of the situation. Does he spit out of contempt, or out of a pedestrian need to get rid of the paan that he has been chewing? The use of ‘as if to suggest’ around his cards being held down, means that there is no confirmation either way that he will not continue his game until Ray passes - she could just be demonstrating paranoia. However, it is entirely likely that he could be waiting for her to move on before he continues to play, that her presence is impeding his ability to go about his business as he would wish. The reader is forced to engage with the series of gazes that he or she encounters, much in the way that Ray has to attempt to understand the world around her. In doing this, the reader may make some reprehensible judgements, much like she does, and in narrowing this distance between the reader and Ray, the ramifications of her actions become more significant.

Tishani Doshi summarises this theme of observation, or gazing in *The Village*, as follows:

⁹⁹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p.37.

¹⁰⁰ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.75.

Even though the camp has no perimeter, there's an unnerving sense of constant surveillance. There are at least three levels of "seeing": the villagers who observe the BBC crew; the foreigners with their lenses, prying into local lives; and the prison guards spying on both. Everyone is watching everyone else.¹⁰¹

I was able to introduce this element to *The Village* by diffusing the point of view so that the three levels of 'seeing' mentioned here could work in tandem with each other. Salter was extremely influential on the novel with regard to this aspect, at the granular level, line by line, of the prose in the final draft. To return to the maxim I took for rewriting (Salter's idea of the 'true story', cited on page 14 of this thesis: 'I would rather be in a room with someone who is telling me the story of his life, which may be exaggerated and even have lies in it, but I want to hear the true story, essentially'), I could see upon re-reading *The Hunters* that Salter is often concerned with actually highlighting the exaggerations and lies that are inherent in story-telling, even as he presents a story as the 'true story'.¹⁰² Instead of being the passive recipient of the contradictions, inferences, and paradoxical meanings that are part and parcel of being in a character's point of view, or a narrator's point of view, Salter forces the reader to take an active part in decoding the text. This sense of multiple meanings, dependent upon perspective, was immensely exciting to me as I rewrote *The Village*, and to my mind, very nutritious for the new incarnation of the novel.

¹⁰¹ Tishani Doshi, 'The Village by Nikita Lalwani - a review', *The Guardian*, (UK), Friday 22 June 2012
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/22/the-village-nikita-lalwani-review>> [accessed 10 April 2014]

¹⁰² Edward Hirsch, 'Interview with James Salter: The Art of Fiction', *Paris Review*, No.133 (Summer 1993), p.7.

CHAPTER 5

Daniyal Mueenuddin

Translating the subcontinent: a study of sense of place

The first draft of *The Village*, as mentioned in the first section of this thesis, provoked this response from my editor, in terms of sense of place:

...often it feels as if the story, or Ray's dilemmas could be going on anywhere. You need to really use the originality of what you have in terms of place and set up to really bring out the story, the tension, the uncomfortable relationships, the characters, the themes, the points you want to make. I'm afraid at this point it feels as if there is far too much telling and not enough showing. It feels as if the reader is not allowed to discover Ray or understand her feeling within the context.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Mary Mount (email to the author, 9 Sept 2010) quoted with permission.

This idea of discovery for the reader of character motivation ‘within the context’, and the effect of ‘context’ or place on the ‘story, the tension, the uncomfortable relationships, the characters, the themes’ was an important guiding principle for me in writing the second draft of the novel. It seemed to me that my anxiety in writing about India (the fear that I would be clichéd when describing the constituent elements of the village) had robbed the novel of its entire housing, leaving the reader direction-less, in terms of knowing how exactly to read the book. It was much more than a lack of scene-setting or descriptive detail in the abstract sense that was the problem with the book. In the notable lack of sense of place, there was a significant lack of authorial stance. To this end, I thought a lot about how sense of place functions as a guide for the reader, in terms of navigating every aspect of a novel- as described by Eudora Welty in her seminal essay *Place in Fiction*, where she says of the author, ‘...place is where he has roots, place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference; in his work, the point of view.’¹⁰⁴

And later, of the way in which this brings a sense of safety for the reader, the sense that something is in her hands that will prevent her from getting lost, ‘a ball of golden thread’:

Carried off we might be in spirit, and should be, when we are reading or writing something good; but it is the sense of place going with us still that is the ball of golden thread to carry us there and back and in every sense of the word to bring us home.¹⁰⁵

Welty writes of the importance of the ‘local’ when it comes to sense of place - how the local contains the past, the present and the future, and in that sense, is a place full of ‘human feeling’:

The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of "What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?" - and that is the heart's field.¹⁰⁶

This desire to engage the reader, at an emotional level, through a confident embrace of a sense of place in rural India, led me to read and study the work of a Pakistani writer, Daniyal

¹⁰⁴ Eudora Welty, *Place in Fiction*, (New York: House of Books, 1957), p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Eudora Welty, *Place in Fiction*, (New York: House of Books, 1957), p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ Eudora Welty, *Place in Fiction*, (New York: House of Books, 1957), p. 4.

Mueenuddin, whilst writing the second draft of *The Village*. Mueenuddin is the author of a collection of linked short stories, *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, and a finalist for the Pulitzer prize in 2010. The book is set within the feudal situation of a large farm in Pakistan, and explores the way in which new business and globalisation infiltrate the community.

Mueenuddin has spoken openly of how he is influenced by Chekhov ('I am never not reading Chekhov'), and this is apparent in the stories, which were particularly interesting to me in terms of how they present the class structure of the place.¹⁰⁷ Each story is told from the point of view of a different person on the compound: the electrician who lives with his eleven daughters in a hut that he has built with his own hands, the landowner's daughter who has returned from studying at an Ivy league college in America, and the servant girl who sleeps on the floor of the proprietor's kitchen are a few examples. In this way, he presents the concerns of each character, whilst staying broadly in the same place, on the compound that is the farm. Due to the differing points of view, we are exposed to different aspects of place as the book grows. The multiplicity of perspective is intimately bound up with the general and particular details of place that we are given as a reader whether via the character's perception of his or her surroundings, or through narratorial comment on the character in his or her surroundings. In rewriting *The Village* I was grappling with the desire to build up this multiplicity of perspective, and empathy with the various inhabitants of the village community - from the men and women who have committed crimes, to their children, the governor and the different people in the BBC film crew.

Sohomit Ray has commented that this powerful sense of place has meant that Western critics often see this book by Mueenuddin as 'stringently representative' of current day Pakistan:

The choices Mueenuddin makes as a writer might be a reason why his stories are read to be so stringently representative. Historically, the short story cycle has been used by authors who have emphasized a strong sense of place or community in their works: James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), and more recently, Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozshah Baag* (1992). It can be argued that what these authors attempt is a negotiated verisimilitude in their works—negotiated by their subjectivity and

¹⁰⁷ Javed Jehangir 'An Interview with Daniyal Mueenuddin', *Beyond the Margins*, February 23, 2010 <<http://beyondthemargins.com/2010/02/interview-with-daniyal-mueenuddin/>> [accessed 25 June 2014]

Indeed, Mueenuddin himself has spoken in interview of how his perspective on the Pakistani farm where he grew up, is that of both an outsider (he left the country to study at Yale University, USA) and insider (as an adult he has returned to run the family farm and live in Pakistan) which would suggest that this ‘negotiated verisimilitude’ is entirely intentional, and something that he sees as part of the transaction one makes with a western audience when writing about the subcontinent:

I think it is remarkable that so many of these (Pakistani) writers who are getting prominence do have this perspective from the West. One explanation is that we're writing for Western audiences, mostly, and it's like translation: you have to know the language you're translating into perfectly. It's obviously very useful to understand the audience you're writing for. This becomes most relevant in my writing when I'm writing dialogue. I intuit what the characters would say, and then put it in a way that feels like real speech in English.¹⁰⁹

Part of this act of translation is to place characters in the context of their physical environment, as well as presenting their concerns through gentle authorial interjection. This can be seen from the very beginning of the first story in the collection: ‘Nawabdin Electrician’, which presents the eponymous character as a semi-mythic personality, who has an impact on the whole of the community we are about to encounter, due to his ‘signature ability’:

He flourished on a signature ability: a technique for cheating the electric company by slowing down the revolutions of its meters, so cunningly performed that his customers could specify to the hundred-rupee note the desired monthly savings. In this Pakistani desert, behind Multan, where the tube wells pumped from the aquifer day and night, Nawab’s discovery eclipsed the philosopher’s stone. Some thought he used magnets, others said heavy oil or porcelain chips or a substance he found in beehives. Skeptics reported that he had a deal with the meter men. In any case, this trick guaranteed Nawab’s employment, both off and on the farm of his patron, K. K. Harouni.¹¹⁰

This marvellous introduction forces us to take part in the conjecture around Nawabdin Electrician, and his ‘signature ability’ - as though we are one of the inhabitants of the farm - so strong is the sense of place, and of Nawabdin Electrician within that place. The paragraph suggests that there is

¹⁰⁸ Sohomit Ray, ‘A review of “ In Other Rooms, Other Wonders”’ *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2010), p.4.

¹⁰⁹ Jenny Jabroff, ‘Writer Daniyal Mueenuddin on Pakistan, fame’, *Newsweek*, 7 September 2009, p.17.

¹¹⁰ Daniyal Mueenuddin, ‘Nawabdin Electrician’, *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), p.10.

great significance to the fact that Nawabdin Electrician is able to cheat the electric company in this way - it could be the making of him - and whether he uses oil, porcelain, or his own cunning in doing deals with the meter men, what matters is that we welcome the knowledge that he can 'flourish' on this ability, much like a cactus in the dry deserts of Pakistan. It makes him instantly sympathetic - surely we would all like to hope that we could 'flourish on a signature ability' that could guarantee our employment in life. There is something extremely optimistic in this knowledge with which we enter the book as readers: Nawabdin's success, although illegal, suggests that we all have a chance, if we hone a skill, to become something in the world, someone of note, and have some control over our fates, however austere our surroundings. The empathy established by letting us know of Nawab's 'technique' is juxtaposed with the specific descriptive details that place him in his very particular environment: the 'aquifer', the 'Pakistani desert', the proper names: 'Nawab', 'Multan' and 'Harouni', the 'hundred-rupee' notes that are being saved by the inhabitants, due to Nawab's work. There is the sense that he is cheating an energy company for people of all classes, whether the owner of the entire farm, or the people who are living in and around him. In this sense he feels like an important knot at the centre of the community. Everyone needs electricity, and so, everyone needs Nawab.

The second paragraph builds upon the sense of place and character in the first, by establishing the past, present and future of which Welty speaks - the 'What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?' telling us of when and how the farm was built, at a time when things were different.¹¹¹

The farm lay strung along a narrow and pitted farm-to-market road, built in the nineteen-seventies, when Harouni still had influence in the Islamabad bureaucracy. Buff or saline-white desert dragged out between fields of sugarcane and cotton, mango orchards and clover and wheat, soaked daily by the tube wells that Nawabdin Electrician tended.¹¹²

In the seventies, when the road was built we are told, the proprietor 'still had influence', and the use of 'still' in that sentence suggests that it is no longer the case. It is enough of an intonation

¹¹¹ Eudora Welty. *Place in Fiction*, (New York: House of Books, 1957), p. 4.

¹¹² Daniyal Mueenuddin, 'Nawabdin Electrician', *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), p.10.

to make us wonder at the fortunes of the farm in the modern world, the way in which it survives - whilst we travel through a landscape which is a mixture of old, unchanged ('buff or saline-white desert' and crops that could be old or new 'fields of sugarcane and cotton, mango orchards and clover and wheat'. The accretion of these small shapes and colours within the fields and desert terrain (rows of mango trees or sheaves of wheat) gives us a visual sense of the whole place. In parallel we are provided with the roles of the characters that form, so far, the reader's compass points within the place. These include the owner, Harouni, and the key protagonist of the story, 'Nawabdin Electrician'. It is interesting that the leading character is referred to as 'Nawabdin Electrician' here in the second paragraph, rather than the by the more intimate 'Nawab', of the first paragraph. This use of the moniker through which he would most likely be known in his working life, shifts the point of view very subtly from the first paragraph, where the reader is bound up with Nawab's personal journey, to more of an external view of him within the visual portrait that is being built up of the landscape. He is Nawabdin Electrician, and he is crucial to the operation of this entire farm, as all of these fields are 'soaked daily by the tube wells' that he tends.

In his 1980 essay entitled 'The Sense of Place', the poet Seamus Heaney compares two Irish poets - Patrick Kavanagh and W.B Yeats, in terms of their approach to the Ireland of their upbringing. Kavanagh, he argues, would classify himself as 'parochial', while Yeats, would classify himself as 'national'. And yet, Heaney, writes, the most interesting thing in Kavanagh's work, is the relationship, or argument that Kavanagh has with the place that is his home:

Patrick Kavanagh's place was to a large extent, his subject, and his quarrel with himself was his quarrel between himself and it, between the illiterate self that was tied to the little hills and earthed in the stony grey soil, and the literate self that pined for the "City of Kings" where art music and letters were the real thing". His sonnet 'Epic' is his comprehension of this about himself and his affirmation of the profound importance of the parochial.¹¹³

I would argue that this same quarrel between Mueenuddin and the country of his origin is an important source of the dynamic of *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, showing us the farm as he

¹¹³ Seamus Heaney, 'The Sense of Place', *The Cork Review* no. 3 (Mar/Apr 1980), p.14.

does, from the viewpoint of moneyed global Pakistani youths who return from studies abroad, as well as from the viewpoint of unskilled or skilled labourers and employees like Nawabdin Electrician. Viewed as a whole, the book could similarly be seen as an ‘affirmation of the profound importance of the parochial’. Mueenuddin eschews large statements about Pakistan as a nation, whilst providing a cross section of Pakistani society through the microcosm of the farm and its inhabitants. Mueenuddin’s characters are comprehended through close up detail. I was interested in doing something similar with *The Village*, and worked to use a similar technique of close-up detail when showing characters in their immediate environment, within the compound of the prison village. For example, the opening paragraph of the final version uses the same technique, of placing the security guards within their environment:

They regard her with a perfect indifference. There are three of them, of varying heights, their belted khaki safari suits finished cleanly with the bright gloss of winter sunlight. They loiter at the entry gate, two of them standing arm in arm, dwarfed by the high peepal trees behind them, the branches against the sky. The earth around them is pale and heavy, the colour of gram flour, interrupted rarely by weeds. They do not seem self-conscious.¹¹⁴

These early lines establish the security guards in their ‘belted khaki safari suits’ firmly within the geographical constituent elements of the village that we are going to inhabit for the duration of the book: the earth around them, the winter sunlight that casts a gloss over each of them, and the peepal trees which dwarf their forms. They are watching Ray from the first line, and ‘do not seem self-conscious’ instead they ‘regard her with a perfect indifference’ as they are comfortably within the home space of the village. This dynamic of Ray as outsider, being watched, and watching in return, is an important thematic repeating trope in the book.

Later in the same chapter, the unease felt by Ray at her own intrusion into the village ecosystem, is accentuated by the different ways in which she, and the village inhabitants exist within the space, beginning with the boy who carries her bags:

¹¹⁴ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.2.

The bags teetered on his head. She wanted to trust him, but anxiety propelled her forwards. The kit was so delicate; there was no way he could know what he was carrying. He was weaving his way quickly through the central expanse of the field, already under the shade of the first peepal, his bare feet slapping down in quick repetition so that he was walking in a style that was almost running, heaving his gangly form in a jerky motion to accommodate the weight on his head. She pulled her suitcase forcefully on the uneven ground. It was too heavy for her to carry, in spite of her remonstrations to the guards, and now she winced at the drone. Birds circling above squeaked tightly, innocently. As they approached the settlement she saw a white bullock rubbing itself against a small tree, horns flashing.¹¹⁵

Ray is anxious at the safety of entrusting the film kit to a young boy, but he is completely at ease within the landscape: in spite of being barefoot, he is ‘almost running’. She, on the other hand, finds it difficult to follow through on her decision to carry her own bag, once she realises that she cannot roll it along on the uneven ground. The birds above her, the bullock ahead, the peepal tree and its shade, the boy’s feet slapping down on the ground - these elements of place are significant in locating the two characters within the environment that is Ashwer village. Although there are guards, and the place is a prison, I used these markers of place to highlight the fact that it seems, at first glance, to be like any rural Indian village of the imagination - something that confuses Ray:

She mistrusted the sense of familiarity, and yet it did feel how she’d imagined. She looked back across the dusty field at the guards. They were now bathed in the blush of morning light, tinted with the colour of pale peach flesh. It caressed them, this light, softened their forms as they sat on the wall, legs stretched out in poses of relaxation, a couple of them smoking.¹¹⁶

Again, the guards are visible to Ray almost as part of the landscape - captured in her mind’s eye as a cinematic tableau, with their legs stretched out, bathed in the particular light of the morning ‘in poses of relaxation’. She, on the other hand, is quite disconcerted by her environment - even though she feels that she is Indian, due to her origin, and can speak the language, she has not visited the country before. James Wood suggests that we can tell a great deal from a character by examining ‘how he bumps up against the world.’¹¹⁷ In this sense, to return to the idea of context revealing character, as we see the characters in *The Village* literally bump up against their environment, we learn more and more about them and how they live in that world.

¹¹⁵ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.5.

¹¹⁶ Nikita Lalwani, *The Village* (Doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2012), p.5.

¹¹⁷ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage, 2009), p.77.

Later on in ‘Nawabdin Electrician’ we see the protagonist in his domestic environment, and learn about his relationship with his wife:

“Hello, my love, my chicken piece,” he said tenderly one evening, walking into the dark hut that served as a kitchen, the mud walls black with soot. “What’s in the pot for me?” He opened the cauldron, which had been displaced by the kettle onto the beaten-earth floor, and began to search around in it with a wooden spoon.¹¹⁸

His nickname for his wife, ‘my chicken piece’, is both part of the environment that she inhabits most often, ‘the hut that served as a kitchen,’ and also reflects the immensely desirable quality that she holds for him. He still hungers for her, after all these years, in spite of her having ‘borne thirteen children’:

Even now that her hair was thin and graying, she wore it in a single long braid down to her waist, like a young woman in the village. Although this style didn’t suit her, Nawab saw in her still the girl he had married twenty years before. He stood in the door, watching his daughters playing hopscotch, and when his wife went past he stuck out his butt, so that she rubbed against it as she squeezed through.¹¹⁹

I was interested in the spatial elements used here to show that Nawab is content with his family life. There is something very affecting about the way in which he stands in the door watching his twelve daughters playing hopscotch, whilst engineering physical contact with his wife. This dual contentment as husband and father, one of his most endearing qualities, is conveyed to us almost entirely through the way in which he is physically placed in the scene: he is standing in the doorway. After understanding the humble nature of his home in the previous paragraph (‘mud walls black with soot’, the ‘beaten earth floor’), this suggestion of familial contentment within his home life brings a very poignant sense to the passage.

To return to the Sohomit Ray idea of ‘negotiated verisimilitude’, I found Mueenuddin particularly useful in helping me to work out how to negotiate my descriptions of India in *The Village* so that they were not instantly clichéd. My route, in the final draft, was to think about the

¹¹⁸ Daniyal Mueenuddin ‘Nawabdin Electrician’, *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), p.15.

¹¹⁹ Daniyal Mueenuddin ‘Nawabdin Electrician’, *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), p.15.

relationship each character has with his or her immediate environment, as Mueenuddin does, and thus to use concrete descriptive detail to reveal character and motivation. I found this to be a great liberation from the anxieties that had assailed me in writing the first draft of the novel, particularly the fear that if I was to describe ‘Sanganer’ (the real-life Rajasthani prison on which the novel is modelled), I would end up presenting generic descriptions of an Indian village. Reading Mueenuddin, I realised that only in engaging with this ‘quarrel’ with myself, to use Heaney’s phrase, could I overcome both the anxiety, and the hazards themselves, with regard to using tired phrasing in describing the rural environment in the novel. Mueenuddin does not seek to write a book that is ‘stringently representative’ of Pakistan, even though once published, the book could invariably be seen as such by some readers and critics. Instead, the humanity of Mueenuddin’s collection of short stories lies in his ability to detail his characters simultaneously with the close, empathetic precision necessary to capture their personal concerns, and the wide angled overview of a scene, showing the dynamic of each character in his or her physical environment. This technique transformed the final draft of *The Village*, so much so, that several reviews commented on the strong sense of place in the novel, a quality that was almost entirely absent in the first draft.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ One example: “Lalwani has produced a thoughtful novel that envelops us in the oppression and beauty of the rural prison, yet resists simplification and stereotypes.” Maria Crawford, ‘Prisoners’ lives’, *Financial Times* (UK, June 22, 2012), p.12.

CONCLUSION

Writing from life brings with it a set of challenges that have always been of concern to fiction writers. Philip Roth's assertion that the great 'novelistic gift' is to be alternately an 'impersonator', a 'liar' and a 'con-man' who indulges in 'mock-autobiography or hypothetical autobiography or autobiography grandiosely enlarged' has always been of interest to me in my practice as a writer, alerting me as it does, to the amount of authorial engagement that is required in order to write a story that feels 'real' or 'true' to the reader.¹²¹ With both of my novels, I have used a documentary approach as a starting point for fiction, searching for material in my own personal history, and interviewing people, documenting places, as one would do in preparation for filming. In being forced to rewrite *The Village* significantly from the first draft, I found myself examining ideas of truth and authenticity with regard to my writing as a piece of fiction. On some level, in

¹²¹ Hermione Lee, (Interviewer), 'Interviews: Philip Roth: The Art of Fiction' *The Paris Review* no.84 (Fall 1984), pp. 20-21.

writing the first draft, I had assumed an authenticity to the text, due to the fact that some of the material was drawn from a real life situation, interviews with real people, and my own ‘real’ experiences. The notes from my editor suggested otherwise, that the novel was suffering from lack of authenticity in terms of character and place, and that there was a *lack* of authentic detail rather than a surfeit of elements that felt ‘true’.

In exploring my process by writing this thesis, I find that I am glad to have received her intervention. The published version of the novel is hugely improved by it, and I have grown both creatively and critically as a writer through the process of self-interrogation required by the rewrite. Roth claims that rather than questioning a novelist about what did actually happen in life, ‘a more intriguing question is why and how he writes about what hasn’t happened—how he feeds what’s hypothetical or imagined into what’s inspired and controlled by recollection.’¹²² In looking at the first draft of the novel, I realised that my own anxieties about authenticity (being a British writer of Indian origin) were preventing me from allowing this very necessary, fluid movement between real, imagined, hypothetical and remembered lives and places. I had left out a lot of telling detail. The result was a stilted draft, aptly summarised by my editor (in a pivotal line to which I have returned several times in this thesis) that although full of potential, ‘could have been set anywhere’.

I have come to understand that, like the three writers in this thesis, I am concerned with the way in which a situation can be presented in a novel and be perceived in several ways by a reader, rather than have a single reading. Like Lessing, I am interested in the presentation of the self: specifically the difference between thought and action when in a colonial situation (how people act in a way that is not always commensurate with their own ideas of self). Like Salter, I favour the act of attenuating the moral judgements of the narrator, so that an air of ambiguity can exist with regard to authorial stance, forcing the reader to take an ethical stance of his or her own. And like Mueenuddin, I see the characters in the novel as being inextricably bound up with their physical

¹²² Hermione Lee, (Interviewer), ‘Interviews: Philip Roth: The Art of Fiction’ *The Paris Review* no.84 (Fall 1984), pp. 20-21.

surroundings, and attempt to uncover motivation by dwelling upon this relationship at key moments.

In studying and understanding these writers, and reflecting upon my process, I was able to rewrite *The Village* with an understanding of these specific, very useful aspects of craft. I feel that completing this PhD has strengthened my critical and creative abilities and I look forward to deepening this knowledge as I approach my next project.

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APPENDIX

A summary of *The Village*

Told through the eyes of a British-Asian documentary-maker, *The Village* is a satire on media intrusion, exploring how current observational television programmes masquerade as modern-day anthropology.

Drawing on established narratives of western 'visitors' in rural villages in India and Africa (including novels and non-fiction by Conrad, Naipaul and Coetzee), the book aims to subvert canonical postcolonial representations of the western gaze by having a woman of Indian origin who has grown up in the UK as the protagonist and focaliser of the story.

Through a simultaneous exploration of media ethics and the shifting, chameleon cultural identity of this central character, the novel explores questions of 'truth' and 'reality' as subjective elements of storytelling - whether for television, or the novel itself.

The location of the book is modelled on a real-life 'prison-village' which solely exists for inmates who have been convicted of murder in Rajasthan, North India, and includes original interviews with inmates, obtained by working closely with the organization Penal Reform International.

The novel explores the binary division between observer and observed by using the stylistic device of viewing the community and place through the lens of a camera. This occurs literally, and also metaphorically, by identifying the gaze of the central protagonist and her imagination, with that of a camera lens.

This blurring of reality and imagined reality continues through the use of script, voiceover and stage descriptions in the novel, sampling cinematic conventions to explore the hidden manipulation that is necessary to the 'art' of creating compelling television, particularly that which is presented as reportage, or authentic reality.

The Village also examines language as a tool of corruption – the Hindi spoken by the local villagers is translated with varying degrees of truthfulness, an accuracy that is dependent upon the needs of the programme-makers, and the story that is being constructed.

In examining the conventions and methods used to create a story, *The Village* is also about the process of writing the novel itself.

The Village was published by Viking UK in April 2012, and by Random House USA and Doubleday Canada in June 2013.

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