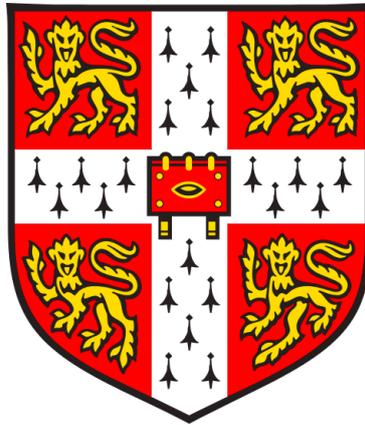


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Subjectivities in Decolonisation:
The Post-Independence Film and Novel
in Africa and South Asia

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Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

Abstract

This thesis investigates post-independence African and South Asian film and literatures for their attention to the fraught relationship between subjectivity and historic decolonisation. Amidst social, political and economic obstacles in the 1950s–80s, a pioneering generation of novels and films emerged. Although they were in many ways “literatures of disillusionment” (Lazarus 1990), they also exposed neocolonialism to ask if, and how, resistance was possible.

I propose the conceptual node of subjectivity as a multi-valenced but comprehensive means to read and interpret African and South Asian post-independence novels and films. Offering a materialist approach to the treatment of subjectivity via the thought of Frantz Fanon, I elucidate the dialectical relation between the self and the world that he gestures towards. In an interdisciplinary and comparative approach, I then consider eight texts via this Fanonian approach to subjectivity, pairing one novel and film in each chapter by their common historic critiques. Chapter two considers the “problem” that women’s subjectivities pose to Kenyan and Indian projects of anti-colonial nationalism in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and *Ghare Baire* (1984) by Satyajit Ray respectively; chapter three, how postcolonial elites’ crises of subjectivity entrench neocolonial material conditions in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and Ousmane Sembène’s *Xala* (1975); chapter four examines how Ritwik Ghatak’s *Cloud-Capped Star* (1960) and Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* (1982) posit subjective experience as an intervention into Partition and Nigerian Civil War historiographies respectively; and chapter five discusses the relationship between subjectivity and spaces in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar In A Sieve* (1954) and Souleymane Cissé’s *Baara* (1978).

Demonstrating how paying critical attention to the mutually effectual and co-constitutive relationship between subjectivities and their lived conditions surfaces the structures and effects of the diverse contexts of “arrested decolonisation” (Jeyifo 1990) in these texts, this thesis affirms that a materialist approach yields rich inroads into how, and why, structural decolonisation and the “decolonising of minds” (Ngũgĩ 1986) are intertwined.

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Introduction

In *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), Frantz Fanon writes: “The Algerian people have thus decided that, until independence, French colonialism will be innocent of none of the wounds inflicted upon its body and its consciousness” (118). Although he is speaking from the particular context of the Algerian War of Liberation (1954-1962), he is also naming two sites of the effects of colonialism: “body” and “consciousness”. The link between them suggests what Fanon’s first book, *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), and his final book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), explicitly names, theorises, and illustrates through examples: that decolonisation is a double transformation of sorts.¹ It is a political project that challenges, with the intention to dismantle and transform, the economic and political structures of European colonialism. This necessarily means – as Sara Salem points out (2019) of Fanon’s invitation to “stretch Marxism” – understanding the particularities of capitalism in the colonial and postcolonial world specifically.² Further, as Neil Lazarus has elucidated, the project is undertaken through a nationalitarian struggle, even though “nations, of course, like ‘natives,’ are a function of colonialism... But the materiality of colonialism must be reckoned with, and cannot simply be wished away” (Lazarus 1993, 75). “Body and consciousness”, as in Fanon’s usage above, gestures to the other transformation: one that occurs in the realm of subjectivity, and demands that we see the violence done therein in direct relation to the

¹ As Kathryn Batchelor and Sue-Ann Harding examine (2018), a whole host of translation and editorial decisions and their contexts have for decades influenced how Fanon’s *oeuvre* has been read, understood and disseminated. Concurring with Nigel C. Gibson’s reasons (2007), I have throughout used Richard Philcox’s 2004 translation of *Les damnés de la terre* (Grove) and his 2008 translation of *Peau noire masques blancs* (Grove) for the corrections and clarifications Philcox makes on Constance Farrington’s and Charles L. Markmann’s translations.

² My use of “postcolonial”, as in “postcolonial texts” or “postcolonial governments” is, as Ella Shohat proposes, intended to indicate “less an ‘after’ than a following, going beyond the moment” (1992, 108) of independence. It points instead to “living with the legacies of”, in a broad sense. This understanding of “postcolonial” differs from the narrower use to which I put the term “neocolonial” throughout, in the sense that the former “living with” may not necessarily in every sphere of life be defined by direct continuities with colonialism, or in asymmetrical relation to Western capitalism.

political struggle waged for liberation (“until independence”) and to the material conditions under which that struggle happens (as experienced through “body and consciousness”).

This thesis seeks to approach subjectivity from a materialist point of view with the help of Fanon’s thought. As the above sketch has sought to briefly introduce – but which numerous other examples from his writing expand on – Fanon, as a radical psychiatrist and anti-colonial thinker, extensively considers how the systemic conditions of colonialism and neocolonialism impact upon people through the material forces they exert: economic, political and social.³ He analogously attempts, I will propose, to demonstrate how the terrain of subjectivity cannot be discounted if we are to understand these material forces, because the *effects* they engender are internalised and reproduced at the level of interpersonal relations and in everyday life. These effects include other systemic conditions that have long intersected with, and been transformed by, (neo/)colonial capitalism, such as patriarchy and caste. These inroads into understanding Fanon’s approach to subjectivity formation are also what guide me here towards a definition of subjectivity, for the purposes of this project and within the limits of a study of this length, as the interior effects of one’s material conditions. That is, the combination of the historical conditions informing the time and place in which one is situated, and one’s lived (partial) experience of this material reality. Chapter One is dedicated to clarifying how this definition can be arrived at through Fanon; however, the theoretical aim of this thesis is not to attempt the gargantuan philosophical task of defining subjectivity, but to explicate how Fanon understands subjectivity – through recourse to his knowledge of both psychiatry and Marxism – as a material component of the transformative work he calls decolonisation.

By tracing the psychological impacts of the structural oppressions of racism and colonialism in *Black Skin White Masks*, and applying these analyses to the contexts of anti-colonial struggle and post-independence nation consolidation in *Wretched of the*

³ When referring to economic and political conditions of continued asymmetrical relation to Western capitalism after flag independence, I use “neocolonial” and “neocolonialism” throughout.

Earth, Fanon sketches how colonialism's extraction of natural resources and labour power is also an appropriation of the means and resources of constituting subjectivities. To do this, he locates subjectivity as a historicisable phenomenon – in this instance, I use “historicisable” to mean something that is to a great degree constituted by material factors (e.g. one's class location), but which nonetheless has interiority – the location of the effects of such shared and intersecting factors, as they are lived and experienced. Or, in Fanon's words, “the past ‘takes’ en masse... then gives form to the individual... depending on what [they] choose” (Fanon 1952, 202).

Historic decolonisation in the mid-twentieth century – that is, projects pursuing the transformation out of those social, political and economic structures that European colonialisms implemented in colonies for the purposes of creating captive markets; territorial expansion; and extracting wealth and labour – were undoubtedly “arrested” (Jeyifo 1990) by a variety of factors that differed across regions.⁴ Fundamentally related to these, though harder to define, were setbacks in “decolonising the mind” (Ngũgĩ 1986). Problems like this latter, as scholars of decoloniality/colonial modernity theory such as Walter D. Mignolo (2000), Arturo Escobar (1997) and Anibal Quijano (2007) have proposed, require us to think of colonialism as structure, rather than as historic episode. When we do so, we can also understand decolonisation as Nelson Maldonado-Torres does through his idea of the “coloniality of Being” (2007), wherein “the supposedly unfinished (democratic) project of modernity, as theorised by scholars such as Habermas, ought actually to be understood as ‘the unfinished project of decolonisation’” (Bhambra, n.p.).⁵ Despite the arresting of those political projects of historic decolonisation that particularly dynamised the 1950s–70s, and the unfinished nature of decolonisation writ large in Maldonado-Torres' sense, those decades saw a pioneering wave of literary and visual expression across Africa and South Asia, much of

⁴ Primarily nation-building ones, although it is important to recall the pursuit of nation-statism alongside capitalist internationalisation (“globalisation”) or socialist internationalisation are not contradictory tendencies (Lazarus 1999; Harman 1991; Wallerstein 1992).

⁵ I use “decolonisation” in this structural sense, of transformation out of both capitalism in its neocolonial set-up in former colonies, and out of the coloniality of Being (Maldonado-Torres 2007). I use “historic decolonisation” in an episodic sense, to indicate the diverse political projects and movements attempted in the mid-twentieth century's anti-colonial and tricontinentalist decades (broadly 1950s–70s).

it committed to social and political transformation. My investigation is set within this rich contradiction. Reading subjectivity in these post-independence texts through Fanon, as a site where the historical and the psychic meet, is imperative to understanding the links they draw between subjectivity and (an arrested) decolonisation. What, I ask, does reading for subjectivity, understood through a Fanonian dialectic, reveal about the material conditions of post-independence nationhood? Congruently, how are the subjective effects of these material conditions (often neocolonial ones, with differences in kind, scope and process between nations) revealed through characterisation, plot, theme and form? In what ways do such effects matter when it comes to material change – that is, to resisting, at a subjective and collective level, the socio-economic and political processes and logics of neocolonialism? These are some of the questions this project seeks to examine via four novels and four films: *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) by Kamala Markandaya, *The Cloud-Capped Star [Meghe Dhaka Tara]* (1960) by Ritwik Ghatak, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969) by Ayi Kwei Armah, *Xala* (1975) by Ousmane Sembène, *Work [Baara]* (1978) by Souleymane Cissé, *Destination Biafra* (1982) by Buchi Emecheta and *Home and the World [Ghare Baire]* (1984) by Satyajit Ray. They take us from the middle of the twentieth century, with its momentum of decolonisation and nation consolidation in West Africa, East Africa and South Asia, to the early 1980s, by when many of the same nations were more or less under the aegis of Western capital and its globalising thrust.⁶

The Fanonian Self

Thinking through Fanon’s definition of decolonisation as being no less than the making of a new humanity, we can find inroads into his conception of a dialectical relation between self and world. “[W]e must make a new start”, Fanon writes, “develop a new way of thinking, and endeavour to create a new man” (1961, 239). As John Drabinski points out, Fanon does not give this “new man” content: “The new man

⁶ This is not to say many attempts at resisting such incorporation, at state or grassroots levels, were not made – and often in the face of staggering odds. The Burkinabè case is an example (Murray 2018).

belongs to the future. The new man is to come” (2019, n.p.). Discussing the fundamental conditions of all history, the “historical act” that Marx and Engels sketch in *The German Ideology* is that “men, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind” (1932, 17). Read alongside this Marxian “historical act”, Fanon’s making of new men comes to also mean the making of decolonisation in daily life, which is to say the remaking of not only of the mode of production but the material connections of people with one another. This, necessarily, begets “the new man”, in the sense of transforming people’s subjectivities. This gestures towards an understanding of subjectivity as that which has interiority as a result of one’s relations with the material world, and of those relations with others that the living of embodied life necessitates. The notion that “consciousness is from the beginning a social product” (Marx and Engels 1932, 19) is articulated by Fanon in a way that situates its full implications for his context of anti-colonial struggle and decolonisation. Subjectivity, as that which comes about through the social and material, is *of* the world to be remade – even as that remaking brings about its own transformation.

In Chapter One, I trace this dynamic process of co-constitution via *Masks* and *Wretched* so as to elucidate the ways in which subjectivity is created by material reality, but is not a mere effect of or mirror of it. Fanon’s discussion of alienation demonstrates that he holds the materiality of selfhood to precede its interiority. He writes, “The analysis we are undertaking is psychological. It remains, nevertheless, evident that for us the true disalienation of the black man implies a brutal awareness of social and economic realities. The inferiority complex can be ascribed to a double process. First, economic. Then, internalisation” (1952, xiv-xv). This is said within the context of a particular assertion: that only an embodied subjectivity, as “thingifying” as that experience of embodiment is in a racist world when the “corporeal schema” (84) in question is Black, can engage with the world and thereby effect change in it. The internalisation of that material reality does not result in a subjectivity that is a seamless reflection of the economic. Fanon’s theorisation, I will propose, thus offers a way to think of subjectivity as that which can effect change so long as it undergoes changes in consciousness as a result of its embodied existence within material conditions.

This is the relationality I work from when I attend to the lived experience of the everyday in my eight texts, looking for the ways in which this relationality enables characters to “know” the contradictions of their (neo)colonial conditions. I do not propose we read these texts as solely about the inner psychologies of characters dealing with the afterlives of colonialism, for not only are these narratives thoroughly attentive to their wider historical and political contexts, but also because form will prove as important as character-driven narrative in tracing the relation between subjectivity and material conditions. Indeed, the interdependence between the latter two in these texts necessitate reading the social realities they depict. Rather than functioning as a means of resolving material contradictions, subjectivity functions as a means of knowing the contradictions of the post-independence economic and political present in these realist works – and from there, potentially, knowing how to live in resistance to its everyday powers of internalisation and oppression.

Laura Chrisman’s application of the Marxist concept of mediation to literature is helpful here, wherein she points out that “the notion of the totality allows us to engage at a macro level with the structures through which literary subjects are given ideological value... allow[ing] us to engage with the ways in which those values are textually produced” (2003, 48). In the writers and filmmakers I will examine, questions around nationalism, economic dependency, gender and culture — complex at a staggeringly macrological scale due to the settings of these texts at the historical juncture between the structural legacies of colonialism, the will to new nationhood, and neocolonialism — are textually produced via the representation of their effects on subjectivity. This renders the latter useful for locating the ideological and structural forces at work in their respective post-independence settings. In other words, rendering the above macro phenomena representable through their effects on subjectivity within the ordinary (and not so ordinary) everyday, these works mediate the full complexity of the material conditions of decolonisation via presenting their effects at a subjective level during this particular historical juncture. These works’ utilisation of subjectivity as means to examine such macro questions has, once again, close resonances with Fanon’s

psychopolitics.⁷ Fanonian subjectivity is a location from which one can acquire knowledge of their own conditions, but only through realising the social and material nature of their subjective experiences. It requires transformation through and out of how “the colonialist bourgeoisie hammered into the colonized mind the notion of a society of individuals where each is locked in his subjectivity, where wealth lies in thought” (1961, 11). Only then “individual experience is national, since it is a link in the national chain, [and] it ceases to be individual, narrow and limited in scope, and can lead to the truth of the nation and the world (1961, 140).

Although I propose this is a conception of subjectivity as that which is materially constituted, this is not to re-emphasise the Althusserian notion of the individual coming into being as a subject upon being “hailed” or “interpellated” (Althusser 1971). Louis Althusser’s notion of interpellation is certainly valuable for subjectivity as I read it in my texts, since it suggests power can also be understood through the processes by which it informs our inner selves: “The subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system” (Althusser 1971, 115). However, in the risk this idea runs of reducing the subject to mere cipher or instrument of power, it is less able to account for resistance and creativity: two fundamental aspects of Fanon’s understanding of the self. “I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists of introducing invention into life” (Fanon 1952, 204), he writes in *Masks*, returning to the aforementioned making of a new humanity as that which can only happen in the collective action of forging anew the world, with all the trial and error this entails. There are resonances in Fanon’s conception with Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of habitus (1992), which sets out a dialectical relation between the objective and subjective (or “outer” and “inner”) by describing how social facts become internalised. Bourdieu variously describes it as “a socialised subjectivity” and “the social embodied” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127-8). This posits a self that is structured by both personal experiences and those that are shared by others in the same material and historic

⁷ I use “psychopolitics” as defined by Derek Hook (2004), which refers to an understanding of both how politics impacts upon the psychological and how personal psychology may be the level at which politics is internalised and individually entrenched.

conditions. I am particularly interested, in the context of subjectivity and decolonisation, in how Fanon claims of this relationality that it makes possible the “introducing [of] invention”. He implies creative agency can stem from the knowledges that this co-constitutive relationship between interiority and objective social location imparts. Thus he suggests that the subjective effects of the objective conditions of colonialism and neocolonialism also determines a person’s actions under such conditions – actions that can be complicit or resistant.

To put this in reference to the texts to be discussed below: the social location that the subjective experiences of characters are situated within becomes an important factor in their exercising of agency under the conditions being narrated. In the unnamed South Indian town Kamala Markandaya depicts in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), for example, the protagonist is able to understand and reject as negative the transformation of relations between people and their environment that accompanies the arrival of an industrial tannery in her village. When her embodied emplacement within the everyday rhythms of her rural location are forced to change, the narrator arrives through her subjective experience to knowledge of the objective ills of capitalist growth: “there had been a time when we, too, had benefited, but we had lost more than we had gained or could ever regain” (Markandaya 135). Ayi Kwei Armah in *Beautiful Ones* likewise pays especial attention to narrating the everyday surroundings of his unnamed protagonist, his highly visceral language shuttling back and forth between describing the everyday and accounting for its effects at the level of his character’s interiority. This relation proves to constitute both the central tension of Armah’s novel and illustrates for his reader how and at what cost the protagonist everyday has to refuse to be complicit in a neocolonial system. In Henri Lefebvre’s theorisation, the everyday “permits the formulation of concrete problems of production... [including] how the social existence of human beings is produced” (2016, 23). The function of the everyday, as these two examples suggest, will prove crucial in exposing the contradictions of capitalist – and in the case of my texts, specifically neocolonial – reality. These texts often turn to narrating the subjective experience of the everyday in order to pinpoint the material

processes shaping post-independence life – processes usually cloaked under various guises of normativity.

Finally, the idea of political consciousness, which will prove central to my discussion in several of these texts, also helps delineate the contours of a materialist conception of subjectivity. Anti-colonial thinkers engaged with the problem of defining political consciousness throughout the period of independence and beyond. Describing what political consciousness could look like at all levels of a decolonised society (if it is to be psychically and socio-politically progressive), Fanon addresses: the “native intellectuals” who must unlearn “the notion of a society of individuals where each is locked in his subjectivity” (1961, 11); “the masses”, who must “be able to meet, discuss, put forward suggestions and receive instructions [...] express themselves and innovate” (136); and national leaders, who must accept people are “no longer a herd, and do not need to be driven” (127). This is not to suggest that Fanon proposes a catch-all theorisation of the relationship between arriving at political consciousness and all forms of anti-colonialism. He is acutely aware of the specificities of time and place in his analyses, drawing most of his thinking on these issues from the Algerian context (2018; 1964; 1952). However, he is clear in his assertion that those transformations that both “world” and “self” undergo when people engage in collective struggle against their (neo-/)colonial conditions cannot but result in a different degree of political consciousness from that with which people may have begun. As such, I use “political consciousness” throughout to mean an awareness of the political dimension (the power relations) underscoring virtually all facets of lived experience; or, as Derek Hook helpfully paraphrases from Fanon, an “awareness both of how one is crucially a part of the world and its conditions, and of how one can and should attempt to change that world on the basis of a carefully considered political project” (2004, 92).

Post-Independence Texts

The term post-independence “invokes an achieved history of resistance, shifting the analytical focus to the emergent nation-state,” as Ella Shohat argues (1992, 107), whilst in its focus on the nation-state, the term also makes it accountable. In this sense, the label of “post-independence” can allow the analytical space for discussing those issues like ethnicity and patriarchy, which are not reducible entirely as the legacies colonialism and neo-colonialism in these texts. Post-independence writing and filmmaking in West Africa, East Africa and South Asia, from where my eight texts originate, are as diverse in their narratives and forms as they are in cultural and historical contexts. However, these contexts are not isolated from one another. Gerard McCann traces how South Asian networks – a “Greater India” within the imperial Indian Ocean – served as the first conduits of Afro-Asian political connection in the early twentieth century, while “the Afro-Asian 1950s were shaped by shared arenas of anti-imperial possibility and experimentation... multivalent linkages that include but go beyond sites of South Asian diaspora in Africa” (2019, 5). Nationalisms, more specifically those of “anti-imperialist national projects and problematics” (Lazarus 2009, 74) as opposed to “imperialist nationalisms... projects of unity on the basis of conquest and economic expediency” (Brennan 1990, 58), were also a shared political reality (albeit with differing routes and contents) across my texts’ geographies. In common also are what followed the high hopes of independence in the fifties and early sixties, which manifests in many post-independence novels and films as a palpable frustration with state apparatuses whose “vocation is not to transform the nation but prosaically serve as a conveyor belt for capitalism, forced to camouflage itself behind the mask of neocolonialism” (Fanon 1961, 101). In the texts here considered that emerge from African post-independence contexts, such as Ousmane Sembène’s *Xala* and Souleymane Cissé’s *Work*, this frustration is communicated especially through class critique, with recurring themes including labour exploitation, corruption in the public sector, and the “the national bourgeoisie discover[ing] its historical mission as intermediary” (Fanon 1961, 100). Meanwhile, as the South Asian texts I consider illustrate, where postcolonial state-led transformations *are* pursued, their results can be dire for those already marginalised by violent processes of nation-consolidation. The refugees in Ritwik Ghatak’s 1960 film, and the tenant farmers of Kamala Markandaya’s

1954 novel, are examples of those dispossessed by the 1947 Partition of Bengal and by the rapid industrialisation of rural South India, respectively.

Of course, differences abound between the countries and continents my texts encompass, not only in the obvious senses of differences in pre-colonial and colonial histories, languages, cultures and religions, but also in terms of trajectories towards independence and the decades after (certainly between the French and British ex-colonies, but also between those ruled by the same power). Comparatists concerned with these differences and connections have already been examined in historical and anthropological scholarship (Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective 2018; Mahler 2018; Stanziani 2018; Werbner 2002). Informed by these connections and contrasts, this study takes four aspects of the historic overlaps in post-independence conditions in Africa and South Asia, using them as the organising themes under which it pairs its texts (these are elaborated in the below chapter-by-chapter description). This methodology puts into conversation African and South Asian works hitherto usually grouped by region or medium, and is able to examine four shared, though polytonal, contexts within which we can situate and read subjectivity in these works.

There is much literary and cinematic production from these regions in the decades of decolonisation that can be considered with critically fruitful and analytically rich results vis-à-vis subjectivity – from Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1966) to Mrinal Sen’s Calcutta trilogy (1970-6). Their absence here is not a reflection of their lack of relevance to a materialist reading of subjectivity, but due to the restrictions of scope that a study of this length necessitates. Exclusions have also been made on the grounds of keeping some degree of comparatism viable in terms of the political conditions and socio-economic circumstances that followed the various independences. Therefore, for example, South African works are not included, because as Andreas Bertoldi (1998) amongst others have argued, Apartheid may be considered a particular extension or variation of the basic politics and conditions of colonialism. North Africa is excluded due to both space limitations and because of the altogether different historical conditions (in comparison to Anglophone West and East Africa) under which its

genealogies of literatures in Arabic, as well as its long-established cinema industries like that of Egypt's, existed in the decades under consideration here.

Many contemporary writers and filmmakers have chosen to return to the post-independence decades in Africa and South Asia in their works: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie revisits the Biafran War in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), for instance, and Vic Sarin the events of 1947 in his film *Partition* (2007). This project's delimitation to texts produced during the post-independence decades is an intentionally periodising move that hopes to sustain some similarities in the temporal and spatial positionalities of my texts' authors, who are working from Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Senegal, Kenya, and India (with the exceptions of Emecheta and Markandaya, who are looking *to* Nigeria and India respectively, from London). These parallels are broadly historic-economic (the decades where colonial capitalism was re-constituting and expanding itself as neocolonial capitalism in all three regions, West Africa, East Africa and the Subcontinent). Although variety in tone, style and subject matter certainly exist between many here — Ngũgĩ and Emecheta contrast in their approach to gender, for instance, whilst the class position of someone like Sembène is markedly different to Markandaya's — these works are all concerned with what happens to subjectivity under the intersecting material pressures of both foreign and homegrown structures of exploitation. The four novels and four films examined here thus do not attempt to constitute an exhaustive list of South Asian and African texts from the period, but I do seek to demonstrate that these eight yield valuable insights into the status of subjectivity in relation to the material processes of decolonisation, and to suggest the interdisciplinary and comparative possibilities of the application of this lens.

Chapter overviews

Granting anti-colonial nationalism's ideological effectiveness in building the momentum of liberation struggle, Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and Ray's *Home and the World* (1984) engage with the nonetheless charged relationship between this and political consciousness. Chapter Two discusses these two texts — one, an early novel

from the major voice of Kenyan literature, the other, a relatively late work from the renowned Bengali filmmaker – with an eye towards the gendered nature of this relationality. *A Grain of Wheat* argues a decolonised Kenya can only emerge if cycles of betrayal are disrupted, and yet gives us characters who cannot move past having betrayed or been betrayed. In doing so, it begins a valuable investigation into the links between nativist politics and hegemonic masculinities, and a critically useful treatment of selfhood emerges. Elucidating the latter, I will then examine how and why the novel grapples with how to incorporate women’s subjectivities into this treatment. In *Home and the World*, gender again circumscribes the effects, reach, and consequences of anti-colonial nationalism. Tracing how the protagonist finds herself negotiating the contradictions between the ideological, the domestic and the subjective, my analysis will seek to illustrate where Ray adapts Tagore’s narrative – and makes studied use of props and cinematography – to show how the heroine’s subjective experiences facilitate in her a political consciousness that undermines the credibility of the men’s nationalisms.

Where Ray’s and Ngũgĩ’s texts thus ask questions of the contradictions and aftermaths of the anti-colonial nationalisms of Swadeshi and Mau Mau respectively, Chapter Three’s novel and film bear witness to the transformation of anti-colonial nationalism into mere rhetoric in post-independence West Africa. Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and Sembène’s *Xala* (1975) examine subjectivity under the socio-economic and political pressures of neocolonial conditions facilitated by the Ghanaian and Senegalese elite respectively. State power, more diffuse forms of social power, and how their effects entwine subjectivity and subjugation in the postcolony engenders the sometimes bitter, sometimes satirical, and often powerful moments within these works. In Armah, “disillusionment is mined to reveal a conception of what a resistant subject may be” (Jilani 2020) under circumstances that demand participation upon the pain of complete social exclusion. *Xala* expands explicitly on what forms a counter-institutional and counter-cultural response could look like. For one, it places some cautious hope (cautious, because Sembène draws our attention to class lines here) in the young urban elite, embodied by the pan-Africanist

daughter of El-Hadji, Rama. Tsitsi Ella Jaji's (2014) particular emphasis on media and "cultural expression" in articulating pan-African solidarities is especially relevant here, as Sembène fleshes out Rama's politics through, amongst other things, a glimpse of her room's array of posters featuring a transnational selection of Black visual and musical references.⁸ Secondly, and I would argue with greater force, Sembène emphasises the agency of the most impoverished of society as a source of counter-institutional political power, encapsulated in the moral triumph of its cast of farmers-turned-beggars. In both of these potential routes of formation for a resistant subject, the taken-for-granted autonomy in personal self-formation is called into question, and the film affirms that collective forms of being and working are the grounds in which resistance can grow.

But as Chapter Four's texts illustrate, post-independence decades were often a chaotic and violent time, particular where they included the drawing of arbitrary borders. Bloodshed, territorial partition and refugeedom marred the post-independence decades of India and Nigeria. Ghatak's *The Cloud-Capped Star* (1960) and Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982) narrativise these national and intimate traumas, constructing stories of survival centred around female protagonists to address the Partition of Bengal (1947) and the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) respectively. The structural conditions of a continuing imperialism manifest as civil war, natural resource extraction, forced migration, gendered violence, communalism and complicit native governments in Ghatak's film and Emecheta's novel. In *Star*, Hindu refugees who have fled to the environs of Kolkata from the newly created East Pakistan manifest the trauma of their geographical and class displacement through intersubjective relationships that are premised upon guilt, emotional labour, fear, and nostalgia. Ghatak takes psychic suffering seriously, but his story of a young woman shouldering the burdens of her entire family crucially situates this suffering in the historical, socio-economic, and gendered framework from which it arises. Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* sets up a similar relationality from the perspective of its diverse female characters. Through

⁸ I draw from Jaji's understanding of Pan-Africanism here, with senses that go beyond state-sponsored cultural and political formations, and which articulate ideas that include transnational Black solidarities across both the African continent and the Atlantic.

them, the novel demonstrates how women's subjective experiences are resources for a war historiography that can encapsulate all dimensions of a conflict, as well as a depository of resistance practices that can be passed on. In both works, subjectivity emerges as subject to historical causation and social experience; thus historically situated, psychic suffering becomes an exposé of intersecting oppressions, and the knowledges of the latter that it yields can challenge state-sanctioned war historiography.

Finally, works that are at least a decade on from their respective independences – as Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and Souleymane Cissé's *Work* are – inform Chapter Five's analyses of displacement sans migration, wherein subjectivity and spaces are intertwined – specifically, the village caught between feudalism and capitalism, and the city where the discourse of African socialism is negated by the reality of the global production line. The need to fundamentally redefine the relationship between culture and environment in the context of national decolonisation preoccupied anti-colonial thinkers like Amílcar Cabral and Aimé Césaire. Cabral in particular emphasised the materiality of this relationship without minimising its diversity of results: “culture plunges its roots into the physical reality of the environmental humus in which it develops, and it reflects the organic nature of the society, which may be more or less influenced by external factors” (Cabral 1974, 45). This relationship extends, socially and psychically, to spaces being co-opted into agendas of continued integration or coercion into one world-system after flag independence.⁹ Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) shows the applicability of this notion of colonial continuity in the effects of the Nehruvian model of development on rural India's dispossessed,¹⁰ and in how, as Ato Quayson writes, “everywhere, colonial space-making also involved the intellectual appropriation and symbolic reconfiguration of the relationship between the colonised and their natural environment” (2010, 970). On the other hand, via forging a visual and narrative connection between labour and subjectivity, as well as through

⁹ These agendas include developmentalist ones, whose “significant threads of continuity” with colonialism “are masked by a complex shift in vocabulary and the persistent narration of historical rupture” (Biccum 2009, 156).

¹⁰ See also Sharma (2012) on Nehru's conceptual framework for India's development in the post-independence period.

attention to the spatial contradictions of post-independence Bamako, Cissé's *Work* (1978) asks whether cross-class solidarities can be forged within the hyper-exploitative urban hubs of this emergent globalisation.

Subjectivity and Literary Realism

The literary works considered in this study all utilise realism to bring subjectivity into the material conditions they represent. This hinges on the form's gesture towards totality – in a Lukácsian sense that I will briefly unpack below – which necessarily includes subjective experience, and which, specifically, has come to bear on my choice here to delimit this study to realist literary and cinematic texts. There has been an ongoing scholarly reconsideration of realism in the field of Postcolonial Studies for some time (Quayson 1997; WReC 2015), but the issue of representation in particular, that “perhaps single most fraught and contentious term within postcolonial studies” (Lazarus 2011, 114), is what plays out in relation to realism and subjectivity. With regards to the problems of representation, Eli Park Sorensen points out how “postcolonial theory eventually developed a sustained infatuation with a ‘struggle against representation itself’” (2014, 240), and goes on to delineate the “kinds” of text that “accord well” with this theoretical perspective. Concurring with Lazarus's intervention in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* that “the vast majority of ‘postcolonial’ literary writing” reaches towards a “deep-seated affinity and community, across and athwart the ‘international division of labour’” (2011, 19), as well as with Sorensen's above analysis of the predominant perspective's problem with literary realism, I want to pause on the question, then, of what we allow the realism of post-independence texts to be, and to do. The “post-independence” kinds of text, Sorensen summarises, have at one and the same time been perceived as a problem by a theoretical perspective that seeks “so-called self-reflexive texts”, and also been “transformed into historical or ethnographic documents (typically, ‘mimetically naïve’ texts)” (Sorensen 241). Meanwhile, although more accurate than the anti-representational theoretical view (which relies on an unsupported judgement that equates anti-realism with complexity), compartmentalising post-independence texts as attempts to “re-orient literature towards

its political-utopian project” (Brown 2005) does not expand on the fact that the representation of subjectivities is a part of both their realism and their “political-utopian” goals. These texts’ usage of the representational techniques of realism to reveal where necessary, and depict where possible, the entirety of their post-independence contexts’ lived experiences – systemic, and subjective – requires consideration if we are to unpack this.

Realism has long been understood as having capacities of representing the subjective effects of those systematising forces within the capitalist reality that it depicts. György Lukács attributes an expansiveness to the mode that takes the subjective experience of objective conditions into its representational remit. In *Realism in the Balance* (1938), a Marxist critique of German Expressionism, he writes that:

“[The realist writer’s] goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society... [then] he must artistically conceal the relationships he has just discovered [...] This twofold labour creates a new immediacy [...] This, then, is the artistic dialectic of appearance and essence” (2001, 1042).

Lukács goes on to contend that the “more firmly [this dialectic] grasps hold of the living contradictions of life and society, then the more profound the realism will be” (1042). The labour of mediation between reality and reality as it appears is what makes realism possible. Indeed, to highlight this relationality, Lukács calls both Naturalism and Expressionism “one-dimensional” (1045) – that is, undialectical – in their respective ways, where the former is devoid of reality as subjectively perceived, and the latter is the purely subjective. Realism, in contrast, is for Lukács more than a static portrayal of “the externals of life” (1042), including as it does the subjective experience of those conditions (“life as it appears”). But neither are its elements like in Expressionism “yoked together [solely] by subjective association”, which for him renders the latter of “dazzling diversity” with “no growth [dialectic]” (1045).

The post-independence literary texts here reach for the representational potential of this Lukácsian dialectic of “appearance and essence” so as to present the contradictions within the realities they seek to depict. Their characters’ subjective experiences yield for them, and for us the reader, the knowledge that their material conditions are (neo/)colonial ones, despite or alongside the presence of discourses of nationalism or socialism. The subjective effects of this contradiction, as Markandaya’s protagonist Rukmani describes, are isolating when noticed and known: “others were reconciled and threw the past away with both hands that they might be the readier to grasp the present, while I stood by in pain” (1954, 33). But the tension of this isolation always becomes historicised in the novels here considered, situating subjective experience within collectively lived experience. In the Emecheta, for instance, the protagonist Debbie arrives at political commitment through understanding the class separations erected between her and the Igbo peasant women alongside whom she is turned into a war refugee. I read these historicising moves as unmistakably political. Though differing across context, inflection and emphasis between my chosen texts, the affirmation of oppressive conditions as *shared*, and the positing of the subjective effects they engender as a *material* component of these oppressions, is not only a realist representational pursuit, but one that is committed to the possibility of political resistance.

This is discernible in all four of the literary texts here considered. In *Beautiful Ones*, Armah provides the reader with a rich picture of his protagonist’s interior state of dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and bitter disappointment, in order to then open outwards into the socio-political reality of a Ghana that fast descended from the socialist promises of Nkrumahism to bureaucratisation and dependency. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ foregrounds the protagonists Gikonyo’s and Mugo’s fraught interiorities to illustrate how the psychic and social experience of anti-colonial struggle must be utilised for community re-integration (a dynamic that excludes women’s subjectivities, which will be explored). Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* and Markandaya’s *Nectar* sustain similar interdependencies between the subjective and the material, but through narratives that are more invigorated by the fact that this relation can accelerate

consciousness of the systemic nature of those oppressions that their characters first encounter as subjective impressions. In *Biafra*, Emecheta challenges her reader to re-imagine non-combatant women's points of view as a definitive, not supplementary, history of the Nigerian Civil War. *Nectar* charts the growing political consciousness of its protagonist through her subjective impressions of her rural environment under transformation, confirming through her embodied knowledge of the cycle of cultivation the deleterious impact of capitalist industrialisation on rural livelihoods. These are some of the ways in which this thesis understands "subjective experience" in its literary texts, in alignment with what Fanon describes when he refers to "lived experience" throughout *Masks* and *Wretched* – that is, embodied experience that includes the psychic component of this embodiment, or the component of "living through", in David Macey's term (2000), the social conditions that define a particular time and place. Their socially committed but critical realism works towards representations of how subjectivities daily encounter and negotiate post-independence conditions in diverse contexts and from variously classed and gendered positions.

Subjectivity and Third Cinema

Representing both the subjective and the material effects of neocolonialism was also pursued in other artistic forms during the post-independence decades. Cinema was quickly recognised as politically consequential in the formerly colonised world. Ideas about how post-independence circumstances should be illustrated and critiqued informed cinematic realism in South Asia and Africa. Articulated in Latin America and taken up by radical filmmakers whose national contexts ranged from Turkey to Vietnam, Mozambique to Cuba, the theory of Third Cinema (Solanas and Getino 1970) set out the vision of a guerrilla cinema that foregrounded collaborative production, practiced democratic screenings, and reflected the concerns of societies struggling with the effects of Western hegemony.¹¹ The search for an alternative, socio-culturally relevant cinematic practice; a repositioning of the intellectual as socially-critical-yet-

¹¹ See also Mariano Mestman (2011) on Third Cinema.

committed; and the intent to evolve with and depict popular condition, are all Third Cinematic attributes utilised to different degrees by Sembène, Ray, Ghatak and Cissé. Their practices vary in style, theme and even politics, but their visions share several of these tenets.

A cinema with Africans at its helm emerged on the continent against the backdrop of anti-colonial nationalist sentiment in the 1960s, when an avant-garde seeking to “décolonisez les écrans” began to form in West Africa with the establishment of FESPACO and FEPACI.¹² Sembène’s *La Noire De...* (1966) is widely credited as the first feature-length film by a sub-Saharan African (though shorter films by both Sembène and others pre-date this). Philip Rosen notes that “within international film culture [there was] a mutual awareness among African and non-African ‘third-world’ filmmakers concerned with decolonisation, national liberation and critiques of neocolonialism” (2010, 255). I do not read this quite as vaguely as a “mutual awareness”: it was filmmaking undoubtedly aware of the transnationality of their own experiences of the enduring social, historical and political afterlives of colonialism, and the global dimensions of imperialism. Cissé’s and Sembène’s formative career years saw them receive training in Moscow, growing conscious of the internationalist dimensions of anti-colonialism. Cissé was trained as a film projectionist on a three-month scholarship in 1961, returning in 1963 to study filmmaking at the State Institute of Cinema until 1969. Sembène was nearly forty years old by the time he studied cinematography at the Gorki Studios in 1962, but his prior working life – as a docker and labour union organiser in post-war Marseilles – charged his artistic convictions with an internationalist politics.¹³

Cissé’s social realism foregrounds the cultural heritage of the Bambara while sustaining Pan-Africanist intentions; “the first task of African filmmakers,” he says, “is to affirm that people from here are human beings, and to communicate those values that

¹² Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou, and La Fédération Panafricain du Cinéastes, respectively. See also Dupré (2012) on FESPACO’s history.

¹³ See also Samba Gadjigo (2010) for biographical material on Sembène.

could serve others. The generation that will follow us will open itself up to other aspects of cinema” (Cissé in Senga 1987). Looking outwards is there, as befitting the internationalist aspirations of Third Cinema, but Cissé here anticipates the task will take long, and that the foundation he and his generation could provide their successors is to begin with a cinema that represents African contemporary realities in their full complexity and humanity. Here, the everyday is no static depository of culture for cinema to draw on, but ever the source of the filmmaker’s imagination. This speaks to several anti-colonial thinkers’ theorisations (Fanon 1961; Cabral 1970; Neto 1974) of the progress of national consciousness among people as that which both “modifies, and gives precision” (Fanon 1961, 239) to the cultural production of the native intellectual. This is significant because it takes precedence in Cissé’s *Work* over visions of a finalised form of national unity. Sembène, too, grapples with the limits of seeking out one indigenous identity or one national culture, preferring to depict instead what Mike Wayne dubs a Lukácsian “extensive totality of life” (2001, 39). The urgent need for economic and political decolonisation takes precedence over gestures of cultural return in Sembène’s *Xala* (1975), as will be discussed in Chapter Three. In maintaining that a sense of social justice emerges from daily experiences — wherein gender, religion, tradition, and capitalism intersect and are negotiated — *Xala*’s and *Work*’s hybrid cinematic practices, I will argue, locate subjectivity as both constituted by, and potential locations of, social transformation.

What is sometimes called Indian Parallel Cinema, on the other hand, is more often grouped under the category of global arthouse cinema than under Third Cinema. The cinematic realisms of two of its significant contributors, Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, are frequently traced back to Western variations of the form. An enduring strain of criticism on Ray is preoccupied with reconciling his films’ humanistic richness with their political and national contents. Amit Chaudhuri traces the influences of John Ford and Jean Renoir on Ray (2008, 54); Ben Cardullo explores Ray’s so-called Chekhovian style (2008, 33); and Lalitha Gopalan (2015, 266) cites Italian neo-realism and the French New Wave at Ray’s formative influences. Interpretations that defend against these same influences centre them again, like Darius Cooper’s emphasis on Ray’s

indebtedness to classical Bengali aesthetics of *rasa* in order to counter accusations of Ray's "unIndianness" (2008, 3).

Moinak Biswas (2005) offers a more convincing argument about the influence of the naturalism of the Bengali novel on the use of temporality and landscape in Ray's realism, while Roy Armes promisingly discusses Ray alongside Third Cinema veterans like Sembène, Glauber Rocha and Yılmaz Güney (1987). However, Armes concludes that, though far from a neutral artistic quality, "[Ray's humanism] can be seen as the product of a tradition created by a middle class that has come to terms with colonisation" (242). Although Ray's work does not overtly align with the political and social manifesto of Third Cinema, this does not set him up in opposition to the intentions or aesthetics of someone like Sembène. Ray's is another partial subscription to Third Cinema: he takes on some of its tenets, such as non-actors and social realism, and makes other choices more commonly understood within the vein of avant-garde aesthetics. The results are often astute explorations of the subjective experience of social and historical contradictions in everyday India. It is an analytically meaningless task to seek to trace these aesthetics back to one tradition in film theory or one cinematic geography. They can easily be found, for instance, in both the Soviet and Weimar schools respectively of Sergei Eisenstein and Siegfried Kracauer – an amalgam that Keya Ganguly identifies as singularly suited for representing the "crises of experience" (2010, 19) Ray's characters negotiate in conditions informed by both Indian cultural norms and the afterlives of colonialism. My discussion of Ray's 1984 adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's 1919 novella *Home and the World* will refer to these historically-inflected aesthetics, but ultimately focuses on how Ray depicts political consciousness in order to gender the two kinds of anti-colonial nationalisms that emerge in this story.

Tagorean influences also sometimes animate Ghatak's stark social realism. Involved with the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association and a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI), Ghatak was deeply affected by the partition of Bengal. His own poverty and disillusionment with party politics gave forth a cinematic vision that looked

beyond nationalist optimism, even whilst seeking “those elements of tradition from which to strengthen the forces of change that seemed most urgent to him” (Dasgupta 1985, 249). By concentrating on those who are refugees like himself, Ghatak “fatally undermines the nation-building project by displaying huge sections of people whose emotional roots are in land and property that are now to be considered a foreign, even an enemy, country” (Raychaudhuri 2009, 477). Whereas Ray, Chidananda Dasgupta argues, “looking back over a hundred years, saw an arc of change that he chronicled lovingly”, Ghatak's lived experience of Partition “launched him directly into the here and now of unemployment, destitution and the disintegration of the family” and, as such, “his vision shot prophetically beyond the immediate post-independence optimism” (1985, 263). While extremes of interpretation have come Ray's way, however, Ghatak has provoked perhaps too little contention. His “prophetic” vision, and his realism, have a complexity that stem from a striking attention to how the material conditions of Partition double in their oppressiveness through their subjective effects. In *The Cloud-Capped Star*, which depicts the plight of a refugee family from East Bengal, the systemic oppressions of poverty and patriarchy manifest also in crippling psychosocial effects like nostalgia, depression and stress. Ghatak is deeply interested in representing these phenomena as material, in direct engagement with social themes related to Indian decolonisation. I will pay particular attention to his “experimental” realism, like the non-diegetic use of sound and non-naturalistic framing that several critics have deemed fuses “melodramatic excess with political commentary” (Herbert 2010), to propose that such excesses of form communicate in the register of psychic effects, thereby pushing realism to account for the very real, subjective components of dispossession, patriarchy, and poverty.

National Selves?

The contexts of all the texts here considered are inextricable from nation as a political, economic and social reality, but to different degrees and in different ways. As Imre Szeman argues, “in part this is a historical necessity... [but also,] by failing to deal with the nation in postcolonial literature, we are in danger of misunderstanding the

significance of the aesthetic and political problems confronted by the writers of the fifties and sixties” (2003, 29). The same is true of its filmmakers, who are immersed in similar “aesthetic and political problems” as they work from literary texts to screen, like Sembène and Ray do. In approaching subjectivity in these works, we not only have to remain attentive to the ways in which that necessitates “dealing with the nation” (Szeman 29) as well, but also the ways in which subjectivity exists in a dynamic tension in these narratives with all of the following: the political promises of nationhood, with regards to decolonisation; the socio-spatial (re-)configurations attendant upon nationhood, like secessions; and the social meanings of nation – that is, those continuities and breaks with existing forms of collectivity that pre- and co-exist with nation-state citizenship.

The first tension, that of the political promises of nation, is thought through subjectivity in texts like *Xala*, *Beautiful Ones* and *Wheat* via particularly visceral language and imagery that draws attention to the harrowing psychosocial consequences of the contradictions between expectations around nationhood and the realities of independence. Sembène, Armah and Ngũgĩ all indicate how dead-ends or mistakes at the level of national politics are impactful at the levels of social behaviour and individual psyches. This in turn is consequential for all of the areas of transformation a “good decolonisation, without aftermath” (Césaire 1959) requires, from the agricultural to the sexual. For Fanon, the nation means nothing if it is not in a collective state of motion: a diverse society tackling shared material challenges in ways that, every day and little by little but inevitably, (re)makes subjectivities and social relations, taking people away from colonialism’s “thingification”. It is a (re)making that must continue in every arena of life as and when the need arises, as people work out ways of alleviating material oppressions. Fanon’s emphasis on movement, dynamism and change in *Wretched* encapsulates this. There, Fanon consistently implies nation is a *popular activity* before it is a space or a political entity: “The nation deserts the false glitter of the capital” where “flags and government buildings” sit as static and symbolic objects (1961, 144). If anywhere, it exists where “the massive commitment of men and women to judicious and productive tasks gives form and substance to [national] consciousness”;

this “collective forging of a destiny” is also “undertaking responsibility on a truly historic scale” (144). The striking tempo of Fanon’s description mirrors the only form in which nation is directly relevant to what is at the heart of the matter: “the front line against hunger and darkness, the front line against poverty and stunted consciousness” (143).

In Ngũgĩ’s *Wheat*, the Gĩkũyũ detainees in a British colonial detention camp in a sense undertake this work of “imagining that is required to produce the defined space of mutual identification and group solidarity that is the nation” (Szeman 2003, 42). The protagonist Gikonyo and his fellow detainees gain a sense of ontological and interpersonal security through collective resistance as they recount the Gĩkũyũ creation myth in defiance, and finally confide in one another their psychic distress at the news of the outcome of the trial of the Kapenguria Six. In Sembène’s *Xala*, we have a similar space for this kind of “nation potential” in the group of dispossessed farmers-turned-beggars, who are perpetually moving around the city of Dakar as they ensure one another’s survival and, in the film’s climax, speak truth to power. Armah’s *Beautiful Ones*, meanwhile, is a narrative of multiple temporalities as much as stasis. Understood through the above Fanonian emphasis on nation as collective activity, the novel’s deployment of inertia and backwards movement speaks to both a failure with regards to the former, and to the consequences of this failure on people’s interiorities.

In other texts, seeking ways of resisting the material and psychic violence that nation-making relies on takes the form of narratives that confront hegemonic historiographies. Ghatak’s *Star*, for instance, challenges state-sanctioned historiography with its focus on East Bengal refugees, “who did not feel at home in independent India and were excluded from free citizenship either through active sanctions or unofficial prejudice and exploitation” (Raychaudhuri 2009, 475). Western (that is, from the Punjab) and Eastern (Bengali) Partition refugees were not given the same identity or status in independent India, with Eastern refugees often “transformed [from ‘refugee’] to the ‘alien’, the ‘foreign’, the ‘economic migrant’ and the ‘infiltrator’” (Fraser 2008, 27): whether Muslim or Hindu, whether fleeing to India or then-East Pakistan. This

double oppression of physical dislocation and pauperisation, followed by social discrimination and violence, rendered nation, as Ghatak knew it, nothing worth salvaging in its post-Partition form. However, this disillusionment exists alongside the intense presence of Bengali classical musical traditions in *Star*, gesturing towards the possibility of the nation-that-could-have-been alongside the pain of those excluded from the nation-that-is.

On the other hand, Biafra, as a never-realised but theorised ideal for Emecheta's protagonist in *Destination Biafra*, represents a potentially post-ethnic nationhood free from the corruption of a native bourgeoisie. However, Emecheta's novel also attends to the politics of historiography in order to foreground the gendered terms on which even this ideal is available, as well as to suggest the naivety of minimising the issue of ethnicity. Although her protagonist first looks to a path of diplomacy peppered with militarism, she instead finds the "patterns of political affiliation" (Boehmer 2005, 15) she initially sought in the idea of One Nigeria in the inter-generational resistance practices of West African women at a lower class position than herself. Meanwhile, Markandaya's protagonist in *Nectar* is a character through which we can think about whether, in Avishek Ganguly's words, "the participation of autochthonous peoples with histories of older and deeper struggles into this protest formation can provoke new ways of thinking about the category of the collective subject" (2013, 61), and if so, how *Nectar*'s protagonist's subjectivity, as constituted by her life on the land, transforms through yielding to or resisting some of the "nation-making" forces at work in her context of 1950s rural India.

As significant as the idea of nation is within these texts' ways of thinking through subjectivity in the context of decolonisation, it therefore becomes fraught territory that must contend with the various trajectories and roles of anti-colonial nationalisms in India, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali and Ghana. Neither criticising nationalism as "one of Europe's most pernicious exports" (Kedourie 1970, 2) nor deeming it "a profoundly liberal idea [...] that could be distorted so as to produce grossly illiberal movements and regimes" (Chatterjee 1993, 1) is helpful alone in

examining the relationship between subjectivity and nation in these texts. As Fanon acknowledges, the crystallising of factors in common amongst peoples (language, modes of production, the arts, units of social organisation, and indeed a shared experience of colonial subjugation) into a nation-state formation at this time promised “a refusal, at one and the same time, of political non-existence, of wretchedness, of illiteracy, of the inferiority complexes so subtly instilled by oppression” (1964, 112). The national question in the texts I consider here becomes a way of thinking about liberating colonial subjects by transforming people’s relationships; the relationship between leaders and people, between the country and the city, between the peasant and worker. The national therefore becomes a conduit for thinking about that transformation *and* its effects at the level of subjectivity and interiority, the latter two of which in turn re-inform the trajectory of social transformation. It is never an end in itself, but it is clear that the national question also renders political organising a major avenue through which people’s lives change. Collective political activity is a key agent that moves people from where they are at the beginning of a struggle – materially and psychically – to where they could be in the years after it. The form and object of that activity, which in the context of these narratives is nationhood, cannot be foregone. Approaching these post-independence writers and filmmakers for their explorations of subjectivity therefore always necessitates reading for both their critiques of nationhood, and their openness to national life as the collective work that it could be.

Historical selves

The taking stock that I find characteristic to the diverse post-independence texts here considered (asking questions such as, “How did we get from colonialism to here?” and “where is here?”) has, with some accuracy, been called a “literature of disillusionment” (Lazarus 1990, 18). But they also mark a practice of representation that is driven by the hope that constructing societies permanently transformed out of the structures and legacies of colonialism, whether those societies co-exist as nations in proximity or inter-continently, is still possible once the new guises of these persistent structures are exposed, and its subjective effects upon people are resisted at the levels of

interiority and the material (which Fanon reminds us are coetaneous, as I will expand on in Chapter One). Crystal Bartolovich stresses that “the insidiousness of colonial regimes in their ability to capture subjects in the everyday, in language and culture” calls for a materialist analysis of the everyday within Postcolonial Theory for its very “insistence that cultural analysis of the everyday (and the extraordinary alike) is inseparable from questions of political economy” (2002, 6). A critical knowledge of everyday life, indivisible from knowledge of the historical-material, yet also consists of the subjective experience of its living. In the case of the post-independence realities my texts depict, this can be understood as the constant negotiation of the contradictions, “irrealities” and paradoxes that arise from the material and psychic conditions of this everyday wherein residues of old and forms of new imperialisms reside.

As these stories seek to locate decolonisation (amongst the shortcomings of post-independence identity politics, as well as those forces fostering continued dependency on ex-colonial powers), they land on the continually made and re-made possibilities within collective and individual counter-hegemonic acts: daily acts that may not even be consciously done, but may hasten a consciousness capable of seeing the misguided routes taken, whilst remaining socially committed. From the cathartic truth-telling of Mugo and Mumbi in Ngũgĩ’s *Wheat* to Rukmani’s environmental caregiving in Markandaya’s *Nectar*; Armah’s protagonist’s rejection of bribes in *Beautiful Ones* to Emecheta’s women collectively managing the aftermath of sexual assault in *Destination Biafra* – these acts can include creative re-workings of customs that keep social bonds alive; the pursuit of social transformation over capitalist development; the preservation of women’s genealogies of resistance; and refusing to act at all when neocolonial circumstances demand you do.

The post-independence literary and cinematic texts considered here depict these manifestations of the disjointedness, unevenness and inequities of neocolonial capitalism in the everyday. This representational pursuit, which necessitates both the representation of material life as well as subjectivity, accepts and indeed centres subjectivity as a site of that neocolonial capitalism’s workings. Within an everyday

wherein these paradoxes of capitalism emerge both structurally and psychically, the self lives its relationship with history. In other words, subjectivity is always already historical, as in Fredric Jameson's sense in *The Political Unconscious* (1982), and in Lukács' sense with regards to the status of the subjective experience of reality when it comes to understanding the "characteristics and relationships which are in [this reality], but hidden" (Lukács 2010, 1042). These texts ask: can subjectivities everyday negotiating such conditions, shape such conditions in turn? What has to happen at both a social and subjective level for someone to act in resistance to (neo)colonial conditions? And where can people draw the material and psychic resources for resisting these conditions' intersecting oppressions – oppressions which in some of these texts include nationalisms (*Home and the World*, *Destination Biafra*) and, in all of them, patriarchy and capitalism? In asking these questions, these diverse narratives look beyond independence to their world yet to be decolonised, and they position subjectivity squarely within this unfinished undertaking.

Chapter One

Approaching Subjectivity from a Materialist Point of View, With Fanon

“Only conflict and the risk it implies can make human reality, in-itself-for-itself, come true. This risk implies that I go beyond life toward an ideal which is the transformation of the subjective certainty of my own worth into a universally valid objective truth.”

– Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952, 193)

Whether the self in postcolonial texts and contexts is read for how it reveals the epistemological and the philosophical “condition of living after [colonialism]”, as does Vilashini Cooppan (2000, xxiii), or for how it exists within a “framework structured by the conflict of classes”, as does Timothy Brennan (2018, 10), it remains a recurring concern within a diverse array of work in postcolonial studies. As the above epigraph from Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) suggests, the notion of a self in a postcolonial context is a terrain both material and psychic. Space and place were the objects of colonial domination, but as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o amongst others have stressed, the reformation of minds – through language, education and more – was where subjectivities could be and were shaped.¹⁴ From the Christian mission schools established in African colonies to the creation of classes “Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay 1979, 34), colonialism’s violent, overt and insidious shaping of subjectivities was deeply tied to its extractive and exploitative economic goals. Manifest in its instilling of inferiority complexes; its discursive machinations, whereby the oppressor’s history became the “natural” order of things; and its racialising of sexuality, politics, society and economy, this subjugation of the colonised via oppression and manipulation of their subjecthoods were, as Tejumola Olaniyan observes, a method of “securing discursive reproduction

¹⁴ See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986; 1993).

and stability” for the imperial power’s economic system (2000, 273). As such, of course, it was also a site of the colonised’s refusal and resistance.

The unreconciled paradoxes of the self living “in a world that exists for others” (Young 2003, 1), too, have been discussed within the contexts of political consciousness, agency, and anti-colonial resistance as much as they have within the contexts of colonial domination, racism, and subjugation. This is partly because of the historically transitory nature of the moment that birthed what I refer to throughout as “post-independence” texts. This was a moment well understood for its historical significance and socially transformative potential. As the Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ wrote, speaking through the voice of her protagonist in *Un si longue lettre* (1979), it also came with responsibilities: “it is the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence. We ... were the messengers of a new design” (2008, 25). Fanon and Aimé Césaire were amongst those who treated the question of selfhood as greatly consequential for this historical transition, elaborating the ways in which the “decolonisation of the mind” (Ngũgĩ 1986) was fundamentally – and indeed, immediately – related to those economic and political transformations that would ensure the end of colonialism in perpetuity. In *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939), Césaire embraces the cultural and ontological possibilities of the decolonisation period: “We are searching for our true face. We have sufficiently condemned fake literature that claims to give us a reflection of ourselves” (Césaire in Walker 2010, 759). This self-reclamation is, as a “we”, an endeavour that draws power from collectivity. Later, in his *Toussaint Louverture* (1960), Césaire pivots to the stakes involved in the struggle for independence. He sustains a critique of the mutually de-subjectifying consequences of the colonial project for coloniser and colonised alike, whilst also thinking on how to break with capitalism, through which “the colonial pact remains intact” (1960, 21). In Césaire’s thought, analysis of the material conditions of colonialism and their possible ending includes the

creation of “our true face[s]” – the past version of which cannot be returned to, and the current one of which, for Césaire, yet remained shaped by colonialism.¹⁵

Fanon, as a practicing psychiatrist, extensively discusses in *Black Skin, White Masks* the othering effects and neuroses caused by colonialism and racism. He also attempts to theorise and emplace the self in political rather than only psychoanalytical terms in both *Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), positing that through collective struggle the colonised (and indeed all subjects “raced” by colonial capitalism’s White supremacist world) can demystify their psychic state of alienation as the result of colonialism, and not some inherent inferiority as per the discourse of racism.¹⁶ Thus, the machinations of colonial “reality” on the self are revealed and confronted: “Decolonisation is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: The ‘thing’ colonised becomes a man through the very process of liberation.” (Fanon 1961, 2). Be they the African writer, who may find themselves colonially educated into a distance from the very people they seek to depict, or a Martinican in Paris, who finds their entire subjectivity is eroded down to the colour of their skin – Fanon takes the problem of selfhood for all whose lives have been and continue to be shaped by imperialism as a political and personal problem that cannot go unaddressed.

A frequent refrain for scholarship approaching subjectivity within the context of (post)colonialism has been Hegel’s “Lordship and Bondage” in *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), more commonly referred to as Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, and of Fanon’s discussion of this dialectic within the contexts of trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism (Krebs 2007; Villet 2011; Agathangelou 2016).¹⁷ But *Masks* challenges Hegel’s dialectic not only through addition; Fanon fundamentally engages there with the

¹⁵ See also Doris L. Garraway (2010).

¹⁶ My capitalisation of “Black” and “White” reflects my agreement with recent public commentary, which reaffirms neither are natural categories designating some feature of humanity but products of social forces. See Appiah (2020) and Painter (2020).

¹⁷ It must be noted that dialectic does not necessarily mean in Hegel “thesis-antithesis-synthesis”; as historians like Gustav E. Mueller have demonstrated (1958), this is a widely held misconception, and the thesis-antithesis reading of Hegel is more attributable to Marx and his *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847).

question of selfhood, and by bringing in an analysis of how the colonial situation alters the Hegelian dialectic, finds it impoverished. In Hegel, the process of self-consciousness takes place at the expense of the Other; the moment in which the self becomes conscious of itself, declaring itself as an “I”, the Other is negated and destroyed as an-other. A Hegelian movement into subjecthood, then, can only come about by “sublating” the object, or consuming it – and in so doing, remaining dependent on the negation of the Other for its own ontological security. For Fanon, the self that is free has “one duty: the duty never to let my decisions renounce my freedom” (Fanon 1952, 204). But far from a declaration of individualism, this is said within the context of how racism reduces the humanity of the racialised into a perpetual cycle of fulfilling or challenging racist values. What suffers is the self’s capacity to create, to pursue social change, and to build new human relations through interdependency. This is no individual failure, but a structural oppression in which the individual has a role: “I do not want to be the victim of the Ruse of a black world... There is no white world, there is no white ethic – any more than there is a white intelligence... I must constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into life” (204). His meaning in using “Ruse” here recalls Toni Morrison’s later assertion that “the very serious function of racism is distraction” (1975, n.p.). Fanon continues, “I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction” (1952, 204) – that is, get distracted from the work of “introducing invention into life” by seeking instead to become an ambassador of the qualities that have been allowed the “black world” as written by colonialism.

For Fanon, the formation of subjectivity must be premised upon liberation and not domination: upon forging anew the world, rather than dominating the oppressor on their own terms and thereby enforcing a mutual recognition. It is fundamentally through creativity, then, that the enslaved becomes a subject, not through consuming the Other (“introducing invention into existence”). My aim in underlining this here is not to open up a comprehensive discussion on Fanon and Hegel, which several scholars have

already offered,¹⁸ but to suggest where Fanon thinks on “the point of realisation” at which Hegel “falls silent”, in the words of Susan Buck-Morss (2000, 843). That point is where, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), the slave goes (through “formative activity” that creates objective change in the material world) from being “not purely for itself, consciousness in the form and shape of thinghood” but “aware of its existence on its own account... in fashioning the thing, self-existence comes to be felt explicitly as his own proper being” (Hegel 2019, 118). When Hegel’s “bondsmen” achieve self-consciousness by demonstrating that they are not things, but subjects who create, his “text becomes obscure and falls silent” (Buck-Morss 2000, 843). Fanon, here, does speak, and in a sense asks what happens next: why, in other words, would subjects who become conscious that they can transform their material world, then settle for “mutual recognition” (Hegel 2019, 112) with their lords, instead of pursuing *more* “formative activity” until their material world is transformed? I would suggest this point of tension is also an inroad into a material conception of subjectivity discernible in Fanon’s thought that, invested as it is in the social, political, and economic liberation of peoples subjugated by imperialisms, holds the self and the world as dialectically related, with “the real leap... introducing invention” (Fanon 1952, 179) meaning the transformation of both, as the material world is acted upon by people who have always known themselves not to be things.

I

A dialectic involving the self and the world is suggested in Fanon’s assertion, adding to Sartre, that an accumulation of history *and* the capacity for choice together constitutes the self, not solely the former. “Sartre has argued that... the past ‘takes’ in quantity and, when solidly constructed, *informs* the individual. He is the past in a changed value. But I can also revise [*repandre*] my past, prize it, or condemn it, depending on what I choose” (1952, 202). In *Masks*, he historicises subjectivity by proposing that colonialism, as a system that has shaped the world as well as a discursive

¹⁸ See, amongst others, Brennan (2018) and Chaudhary (2012).

formation that has created oppressive categories like “white intelligence”, has inevitably, violently, constituted selves. The self as an accumulation of this history is undeniable, but it manifests “in a changed value” in each. It is that colonialism and racism have set the terms for subjecthood – when really it is only material reality that can – that Fanon seeks to counter here. To recover instead the multiple processes that yield consciousness of oneself *within* the world, and simultaneously yield consciousness of that world’s (unjust) workings, forms for him the basis of resistance – and, consequently, the possibility of liberation. As Hamza Hamouchene insists, “Fanon argues we have to work out new concepts of liberation and philosophical thought through an ongoing political education” – one that is enriched and enabled by collective struggle (2016, 274). In addition to this emphasis on creativity, consciousness for Fanon is also about struggle “opening up spheres [people] never even dreamed of” and “the awakening of people’s intelligence and the development of their consciousness” (1961, 130). Given his biography, but also the understanding of self found in his writings, it would be disingenuous to interpret these words as patronising. As Messay Kebede points out, Fanon in some ways “goes beyond the Marxist characterisation of violence as ‘the midwife of history’, [reading] into the resistance against colonialism the birth of a historical subject” (2001, 554). As such, his words suggest that the only conditions under which “self-actualisation” can exist,¹⁹ or can be defined as such, is when consciousness, born of lived experience, begets collective creative activity – the process of which creates subjectivities anew.

Fanon’s material understanding of the self thus has a dialectics, but it rests on the necessity of material transformation for the (re)formation of subjectivities (even as the self has “successive choices” to make within material conditions), and recognises the struggle between Self and Other as an early, indeed simplistic, stage of that transformation. Given the urgency of such a material transformation at their moment of historical juncture, early postcolonial novels and films, with their especial attunement to

¹⁹ I use “self-actualisation” within the meaning of Fanon’s own usage in *Masks*, to refer to those forms of (self-)consciousness that emerge out of collective struggle to remake material relations. On this, see also Ziauddin Sardar’s foreword to the 2008 Pluto Press edition (viii).

the promises and failures of independence, make for a particularly rich body of work for reading through the aid of the above Fanonian conception of subjectivity, and think about its implications for the processes of decolonisation. In the case of my chosen works' contexts, a full and authentic decolonisation after flag independence is often imagined as several intersecting things. For Sembène and Armah, for instance, it centres the dismantling of the neocolonial state; the creation of a kind of African socialism, for Ngũgĩ; Emecheta and Ray stress the transformation of gender relations; Markandaya and Ghatak prioritise economic justice for workers, peasants and refugees; and Cissé especially foregrounds the urgency of freedom from mindsets induced by (neo)colonialism, such as indiscriminately over-valuing all that is Western in source. Whether neocolonial conditions make the self, or subjects with political consciousness make and unmake the conditions, is in constant oscillation within these narratives – getting to the heart of Fanon's conception of the self and its dialectical relation to the material world.

This alternation between source and cause, subjectivity and structural conditions – often to the linkage of the two as simultaneously, mutually constitutive – does not, however, come to mean these texts, or indeed Fanon, espouse a kind of relativism. Although the influences on Fanon's early work – which include Lacanian psychoanalysis, the radical psychiatry of François Tosquelles, existential humanism, Marxism, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology – have perhaps irreconcilable differences in theoretical position and method between them, Fanon's drawing on all in order to analyse the colonial experience and its legacies both subjective and systemic is well-founded in its comprehensiveness. Fanon's emphasis on the impact of an individual's physical body on the formation of their subjective experience of life, for instance, resonates with the teachings of Merleau-Ponty, but pushes his framework to account for the experience of inhabiting a Black body in a racist world. To do so, Fanon applies Phenomenology's model of proprioception – a sensory and psychic process through which we apprehend our own bodies, from its disparate parts, as nonetheless unified and coherent – to the social fact of race. “In a White world the man of color encounters difficulties in working out [*l'élaboration*] his bodily schema. Consciousness

of the body is solely a negating activity”, he proposes (1952, 85). As Gayle Salamon argues, in doing so Fanon challenges that there exists an inner core of the embodied self that is immune to these pressures: “An account of gender and race that understands ‘surface’ interventions to be secondary or auxiliary modifications that are overlaid on the ungendered, unraced materiality of the body cannot explain the pervasiveness of the structures of either race or gender” (2006, 97). Satya P. Mohanty (1997) has also articulated a post-positivist and anti-relative view that parallels the contours of my clarification here with regards to a Fanonian conception of selfhood. Defined by the capacity for rational agency, the “necessarily abstract universalist moral claim” of personhood, for Mohanty, makes “radical demands for equality and democracy possible [whilst being] compatible with different ways of particularising” (199). In Fanon’s “White world” – a colonial, capitalist world – it is not that consciousness of one’s Black body “is solely a negating activity” (1952, 85) because of that world’s racism. This would erroneously suggest race is found upon the body, rather than being socially constructed. Instead, Fanon is making a “necessarily abstract universalist moral claim” (Mohanty 1997, 199) here to point out that embodied existence in such a world – a “White world” that creates the social category of race, then locates it upon the body so as to secure an economic system as normative – is oppressive of the very possibility of consciousness of oneself as an embodied, yet still unified and coherent, whole.

A phenomenological view of subjectivity also understands the self to be formed through our daily, and mostly mundane, encounters with the world around us. Fanon recognises this mutually constitutive interaction between subjective consciousness and the materiality of the world, but asks why the embodied subject these interactions yield is assumed in Phenomenology to be an ostensibly universal one, which has “an ‘underneath’ that is untroubled by dramas and dilemmas of racial or sexual difference” (Salomon 2006, 97). This is not a relativising move, but a critical one. In *Masks*, upon recounting the White boy’s exclamation “*Tiens, maman: un Nègre!*”, Fanon describes how this painfully brings him to the realisation that his embodied self is not just constituted by his own mundane encounters with the world, but by a history he neither witnessed nor participated in. There is no universal “underneath” for him the Black

man, nor for the White man: but *his* embodied subjectivity results in the negation of his humanity, and the White man's embodied subjectivity results in the reassurance of his universality. This is not because each is shaped differently upon encountering the world, but because the world is structured for shaping all in varying terms of inferior relationality to the latter.

Gender and race, as Salamon points out, are “often read from the surface of the body (though in quite different ways), however, gender and race cannot be said to be located there” (97) – in other words, race and gender have always been socially constructed categories, hence racial difference is not located in/upon the individual body. But race and gender nonetheless structure the ways in which all subjects relate to their own bodies and, in turn, to the world. The “look, mother!” scene in *Masks* encapsulates how the reading of race from his mere “corporeal schema” also structures the way Fanon relates to himself and his world in that instant. In David Lloyd's reading of this moment, “what for the White man takes place at the level of the ontological appears for him as such precisely because of the historical exclusion of the black from subjecthood and historicity. For the black man, on the contrary, the historical and the economic conditions of racialization become the means to an analysis of that exclusion and of the negation of subjectivity” (2013, 101). “Body” becomes “subject” by “becoming white”, as Fanon puts it, in the developmental schema of colonial thinking.²⁰ The realisation of this asymmetry – this power relation – is emphasised by Fanon when he describes how this demanded of him in that instant that he move from the psychoanalytic language of subject constitution, familiar to him from Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, and his own clinical practice (“I thought that what I had in hand was to construct a physiological self, to balance space, to localize sensations”), to confront the historical conditions of his being “called on for more” than what proprioception, according to European Phenomenology, should sufficiently construct – his embodied self as a unified and coherent whole. Instead, Fanon is “battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism,

²⁰ This is also the context within which we can situate Fanon's following words in *Masks*: “However painful it may be for me to accept this conclusion, I am obliged to state it: For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white” (1952, 4).

intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’” (1952, 178).

This is a portrait of objectification – of Fanon’s reduction, at that moment and in society more widely, to his mere corporeal schema (“Black”), understood within the developmental schema of colonial modernity as a subject-yet-to-be- (White). This is also, however, an illustration of the dialecticisation, not the relativisation, of his relationship between his body and the world, which is Fanon’s crucial grounds for the possibility of the transformation of subjectivity out of its colonial bounds. This dialectical relationship, within a system of colonial and racist capitalism, can *only* result in a de-subjectifying experience for Fanon, as traced above. In other words, he demonstrates there that if the Black person takes their bodily experience of reality as constitutive of their self, the “coloniality” (Quijano 2007; Mignolo 2000) of that world would mean that they could never relate to their material reality or themselves in anything other than terms that are a mere reaction to its racist conditions – terms that “self-imprison [*m’emprisonnait*]”. Either he “renounces his Blackness” in self-hate, or “surrenders to the irrational” (1952, 93), defending the existence of the essential Blackness of racist stereotype – primordial, earthy, emotional, spiritual – as though it is liberation. As Robert Bernasconi argues, Fanon is here also looking to make the point that Sartre, in locating the *Négritude* movement within a dialectic whose ultimate end was a raceless and classless society in his *Orphée Noir* (1948), renders the diversity of Black consciousness relative to this historical role apparently assigned to them (2004, 107). To this non-choice that essentialises the subjectivity of the colonised down to the historical fact of colonialism (even if it does so in order to name them the vanguard of class revolution) Fanon responds: “I am not a potentiality of something; I am fully what I am [*je suis pleinement ce que je suis*]” (1952, 114). The humanity of Black people, and their subjecthood, is not proven upon their fulfilling a historical mission, as Fanon finds is implied by Sartre – it just is. His qualifier of *pleinement* (wholly, fully) bespeaks a dialectical understanding of subjectivity as conflicts and syntheses of all the above that he has just grappled with: lived experience, history, and consciousness. It gestures to a self that has historicity but is not reducible to it.

The stating of his consciousness simply *as* is not a gesture along the lines of colourblindness, either, but borne of his subjectively experiencing the structural fact of racism. Césaire also delineates the contours of this consciousness; in *Notebook*, after rediscovering and re-experiencing his past (with the full weight of history), Césaire says, “*J’accepte... j’accepte... entièrement, sans reserve / ma race*” (2016, 72). Edward Said interprets this as Césaire feeling, then emptying himself, of his anger – an anger felt in Fanon, too, with his similar exclamation that he will henceforth then “assert [himself] as a BLACK MAN” (1952, 87) (original emphasis). Said highlights how Césaire is here calling for consciousness of how racism manipulates its way to internalisation, which must be confronted with a universal: “you don’t give in to the rigidity and interdictions of self-imposed limitations that come with race, moment or milieu; instead you move through them to an animated and expanded sense of the convocation of conquest [*le rendez-vous de la conquête*]” (Césaire in Said 2000, 305) – to the global reckoning with colonialism. Within this context, the dialectical transformation the poet undergoes throughout *Notebook* – in relation to his sense of self-worth in a world quite literally built upon the de-valuing of his humanity – is not one that ends in nativism, but in a radical coming-together. This global *rendez-vous* can only be realised by “mov[ing] through” and out of the internalisation of colonialism and racism. This call for universality is not at all the discourse of universalising the “Negro”, which Fanon is exasperated to find in Sartre: “the black experience is ambiguous, for there is not *one* Negro – there are *many black men*... From time to time you feel like giving up. Expressing the real is an arduous job” (1952, 116).

This radical coming-together necessarily means a critical approach to any form of a nativist self, which Fanon negotiates through his understanding of culture itself. As his biographer Alice Cherki – who worked under him in psychiatric hospitals in Algeria and Tunisia during Algeria's war for independence – writes, for Fanon, “culture is not to be confused with ossified traditions, essences, or nature; it is a part of the everyday, and it is always created and recreated by action in progress” (2000, 57). By opening up the question of subjectivity vis-à-vis decolonisation from this materialist standpoint, Fanon

rejects the notion that the self is a purely psychoanalytical or philosophical terrain, whilst embracing that it is not reducible to its material conditions because it “is always created and recreated by action” – choices – too. As one of his striking juxtapositions describe, those “successive choices” the self can make are not discursive moves designed to win at a game of power between Black and White, but explicitly connected to freeing others: “We would be overjoyed to learn of the existence of a correspondence between some black philosopher and Plato. But we can absolutely not see how this fact would change the lives of the eight-year-old kids working in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe” (1952, 205).

Wherever oppressive social, political and economic conditions must be challenged, there also is the terrain of engaging with subjectivity. This notion grows explicit in *The Wretched of the Earth*. There, Fanon continues to incorporate questions of consciousness and transformation at a subjective level – however, this time *en masse*, as a socio-political stage towards decolonisation. Whereas in *Masks* Fanon thought on some of the above relations between the self and the (White) world, *Wretched* thinks on the political stakes of two formations common in the independence period – spontaneous violence, and political vanguardism (by the nation-state) – on subjectivity. Several scholars of Fanon have by now countered the many facile interpretations of his chapter “On Violence” in *Wretched* as indicative of Fanon’s unequivocal endorsement of the use of violence. Indeed, reading the chapter within its context soon suggests that Fanon does not configure anti-colonial violence alone as that which creates either a new consciousness of oneself, or a new world.²¹ Rather, as Cherki clarifies, “for Fanon, the essential thing is this: when faced with violence, which prevents being, reclaiming violence is an act of dis-subjection [*désassujettissement*]. To use this violence by turning it over against the person who subjected you to it is, at a time in history when no space for speech has been possible, the engine of liberation” (2000, 262). In other words, anti-colonial violence breaks a state of subjection, but alone cannot constitute subjectivities anew; hence Fanon emphasises the fine line between violence as a

²¹ For a concise summary of this chapter of *Wretched*, see Peter Hudis (2015).

restoration of bodily agency in the face of total oppression, and the same violence as inhibitive of the creativity it takes to then build social and material relations anew. The Fanonian self *may* draw a temporary ontological security from the annihilation of the Other – but if the material conditions shaping it already contain or call for such violence, where there is “no space for speech” (Cherki 262). Violent anti-colonial struggle – even if that violence sees colonised people through to the seizing of political and economic power (as arguably in Algeria) – does not alone transform subjectivities in ways that translate into a changed relationship with the material world.

For him, the crucial addition for resisting and countering the world’s colonial conditions – which do not simply go away when Black men replace White colonial officers – consciousness of both one’s material world as not yet transformed, and in what ways transform it must, are necessary. The question is whether a vanguardist approach can bear such fruit: “Organising wholesale and retail cooperatives on a democratic basis... decentralising these cooperatives by getting the mass of the people interested in the ordering of public affairs... You will not be able to do all this unless you give the people some political education,” Fanon writes (1961, 145). But he also cautions that “the political party in many parts of Africa today which are independent is puffed up in the most dangerous way. In the presence of a member of the party, the people fall silent, behave like sheep and pay tribute to the government and leader” (126). The picture he paints draws attention to the fact that a vanguardist postcolonial party that thinks political education is “mobilising three or four times a year ten thousand or a hundred thousand men and women [in] spectacular gatherings” not only does economic and political damage but, as a consequence, psycho-social damage. People become “silent” and “like sheep” when the “shapeless mass of the people is seen as a blind force that must be constantly held on a leash either by mystification or fear instilled by police presence” (146).

This achieves the economic and the psychic opposite of what Fanon envisions as consciousness, or as political education: “But in the street, away from the village of an evening, in the cafe or on the river, the people's bitter disappointment, their desperation,

but also their pent-up anger, can be clearly heard” (147). This scene of social vivacity and a public politics within an everyday setting is one that imagines not only a new way of governing, but also a new way of being – one that clearly centres resistance (“pent-up anger”) and expression (being “clearly heard”) as essential components of political pedagogy. Perpetuated through relations shaped by democratic material conditions, the daily life of people is the only place where politically conscious subjectivities can be forged. This Fanonian conception of self is therefore also a location from which to know the material conditions around you. I say this not only in the sense of knowing from a certain embodied situatedness (though Fanon, as discussed above, certainly underlines embodiment), but also in the sense that the self was a site of contestation in the altogether material structures attendant upon independence in Africa and South Asia, such as those that helped facilitate ethnic polarisation.

II

Although this study attempts the above reconsideration, it does not do so in the assertion that the field has not already offered valuable inroads into subjectivity. The self has had both differing and intersecting treatments in textualist and materialist approaches to postcolonialism. Its discussion, in contexts ranging from postcolonial discourse theory (Homi Bhabha) to realism in postcolonial literature (Eli Park Sorensen, Neil Lazarus, Fredric Jameson) to postcolonial feminisms (Chandra Mohanty, Kumari Jayawardena), demonstrates that rather than something to be “resolved”, it has been one to drive the field’s disciplinary ambitions and political convictions. Postcolonial theory’s discursive approaches to subjectivity have had applicability to problems such as “the double vision that a peripheral existence in the world engenders” (Schwarz and Ray 2008, 96) – which, some have argued, is a critical approach with the scope to consider both that “doubleness” (subjectivity) and the “world” (materiality). For Bhabha, for instance, a hybrid (post)colonial subjectivity “intervene[s] in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the

uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples” (1994, 171).

Whereas Bhabha’s readings of power as purely textual have been cogently challenged (Parry 2004), points like the above do demonstrate that poststructuralist approaches have attempted to illustrate certain links between a colonialism *out there* and its effects within. These have included investigations of post-1980s anti-realist texts that open up issues of diaspora (Gilroy 1993); globalism (Appadurai 1996); and cosmopolitanism (Appiah 2007). However, E. San Juan Jr. highlights how a problematic use of the relational nature of subjectivity can drive this aspect of the field: “postcolonial theory seeks to explain the ambivalent and hybrid nature of subjects [...] to prove that the colonial enterprise was not just a one-way affair of oppression and exploitation, but a reciprocal or mutual co- or inter-determination of both metropolitan master and ‘third world’ subaltern” (1998, n.p). Indeed, in such discursive treatments of a subjectivity determined between the coloniser and the colonised, correspondingly textual readings of the self have transpired. Bhabha foregrounds the hybrid identities and “third spaces” that colonial domination creates as it seeks complete unification, assimilation and authority; the colonial subject thus resists complete objectification by way of a Foucauldian power circuit wherein colonial power, in its very exercising, refuses to remain in the coloniser’s hands alone (Bhabha 1988, 22). Diffusing itself in discourse and knowledge, it can be wielded by the subjugated in forms such as “sly civility”, where “the authority of colonial command [is threatened by] the ambivalence of its address [...] a problem of recognition and repetition shuttles the signifier of authority in search of a strategy of surveillance, subjection and inscription” (Bhabha 1985, 76). The colonial subject here is a non-dialectical space of inscrutable interiority because they can “face two ways without being two-faced” (77) — or produce and contain their difference and indifference in heart and mind. This approach can overlook

historical references and material colonial power relations in favour of the discursive realm, as has already been argued.²²

In posing hybridity as something troublingly “subject-less”, as R. Radhakrishnan observes, this thinking also “valorises [hybridity] on the basis of a stable identity” (1993, 754) in an ahistorical manner whilst appearing to situate its discussion within the historical realities of colonialism. This valorisation does not explicate this so-called stable identity’s characteristics, and why hybridity is its desirable alternative. In light of recent discourse around “decolonising” various subject areas, Marco Vieira has also taken issue with arguments that espouse “reconnecting with non-Western ways of ‘being in the world’” – not for their valuable attempts to challenge the Eurocentrism of fields like International Relations, but for their uncritical assumption of the existence of some “non-Western” essence (2019, 150). Rather, the “asymmetrical encounter between the colonised and the coloniser has fundamentally and extensively redefined human subjectivity”; thus for Vieira hybrid subjectivities are all that exist, since given the “all-encompassing penetration of Western coloniality (in its political, economic and cultural representations)”, some pre-colonial or uncolonised form of subjectivity cannot be assumed (150).

It is also worth noting, particularly in a cross-continental study like this where the texts considered are from geographies that experienced different kinds of colonialism (the differences between French and British rule, certainly, but also those between British colonies), the centrality of nineteenth-century India to textualist criticism. British colonialism in India was unrepresentative, developing as it did a sizeable “native” civil service and education system. As Laura Chrisman cautions, “it is unsurprising that this geo-cultural terrain [of postcolonial India] should correspond so neatly with Foucauldian theoretical priorities of epistemology or governmentality” (1995, 206). Reading the Kenyan experience in terms of governmentality and discourse,

²² Alex Callinicos’ (1992) warning against an idealist reduction of the social to the semiotic is especially important in light of how much hinges on a vague notion of the “difference” of certain (often colonial, subaltern, hybrid) subjectivities in the poststructuralist approach.

for example, has led to misguided theories such as Gary Wasserman's "consensual decolonisation", which erases the impact of Kenyan anti-colonial militancy.²³ A study on colonialism and subjectivity possibly quite specific to the Indian context, such as Ashis Nandy's in *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983), is an example of the prominence of the Subcontinent in providing the theoretical grounds on questions of subjectivity in the field. This is not to say such work has not made useful contributions to thinking about the self and colonialism, but that any usage of conceptual categories (as Nandy does) such as "inner lives" and "cultural selves" must be read within the context of British imperialism in India (2009, xvi). The alienation Nandy speaks of, for instance, often seems that of a particular colonial subject: one grappling within, perhaps, with the false dichotomy colonialism has set up between their "Western" and "Indian" identities. Nandy looks to Gandhi's position of peaceful non-cooperation to propose that the reconceptualisation of the "West", to strip it of its discursive and cultural power in determining subjectivities, is a form of dissent that has been missing from the discourses of the "modernized non-West", which have hitherto instead been concerned with "beating the West at its own game [...] the preferred means of handling feelings of self-hatred" (xvi). For Nandy, an "Indian" reconceptualisation of the "West" must instead come from "categories, concepts and, even, defences of mind with which to turn the West into a reasonably manageable vector within the traditional world views still outside the span of modern ideas of universalism" (xiii).

How to counter the discursive and cultural oppressions of colonialism is an absolutely necessary question for any anti-colonial position to ask, and Nandy's thought on this has resonated beyond its own context – applied, for example, by Phyllis Taoua in her well-supported discussion of post-independence African writers and filmmakers who were "searching for a restored identity that would offer a creative synthesis forged as a manageable alternative to colonial dichotomies" (2018, 41). However, *Intimate Enemy's* rather striking generalisations, like Indians' "feelings of self-hatred", or the

²³ See also B.A. Ogot's criticism of Wasserman in *Decolonisation and Independence in Kenya 1940-1993*, Eds. B.A. Ogot and W. R. Ochieng, 1995. 63.

assumed stability of the meaning of its concepts like “traditional world views” or “the West”, affords little consideration to those historic and material expressions of culture that successfully galvanised so much anti-colonial momentum in the twentieth century – the kind of expression found, for example, in Jomo Kenyatta’s *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938). In the dedication to his book, Kenyatta seamlessly configures anti-colonial revolutionary struggle as *also* Gĩkũyũ spiritual practice: “To... all the dispossessed youth of Africa, for [the] perpetuation of communion with ancestral spirits through the fight for African Freedom” (1962, vi).

If we were to grant Nandy’s category of “inner lives”, but work with it through a materialist understanding of subjectivity (therefore understanding “inner” to be historicisable: an accumulation of subjective experiences of structural conditions), the question provoked by examples like the Kenyan struggle and others still remains. Are “inner lives” not also directly transformed through material struggle? For instance, the armed struggle in Algeria, which Fanon discusses in *Toward the African Revolution* (1964) and *Alienation and Freedom* (2018) with nuanced attention to its new psychic, political and sexual effects on Algerian society, is clearly not merely seeking to “beat the West at its own game” (Nandy 2009, xvi). Rather, there is a vital relationship sketched in *African Revolution* between collectively opposing the material conditions of colonialism, and building up new “categories, concepts, defences of the mind” (Nandy 2009, xiii) at a subjective level. This is also found in those of his writings for *El Moudjahid*, collected in *Alienation and Freedom*, in which he discusses deserters from the French army, pointing especially to the appeal of the positive motivations (liberation from colonialism, restructuring society) of the FLN, versus the demoralising and unsustainable motivations of fear and hatred of the Arab that the French army sought to cultivate amongst its lower ranks. This building up of “new categories, concepts” Fanon situates as part and parcel of action that militates against colonialism, through the example of how French attempts at appeasing Algerians are failing because an irreversible shift in consciousness is occurring throughout the wars. “This contempt for the ‘stages’ that break the revolutionary torrent, and cause the people to unlearn the unshakable will to take everything into their hands at once in order that everything may

change, constitutes the fundamental characteristic of the struggle of the Algerian people” (1964, 103), Fanon writes; this shift in consciousness is due to the everyday labour of organisation, combat, defence and problem-solving that Algerians are engaging in.

On the other hand, the prioritisation of the historical in materialist approaches to postcolonial studies has often meant a focus on the collective of subjects — with particular attention paid to nation as a form of this collectivity. In writings including but not limited to Chrisman’s, Parry’s, Lazarus’s and Bartolovich’s, agency and resistance become key terms for exploring the “one, and unequal” exploitation and dispossession of subjects in different (post)colonies (WReC 2015). This is particularly important for examining independence and decolonisation in countries that saw a violent and protracted struggle for self-determination, and closely corresponds to Fanon’s theorisation of the relationship between political resistance and the reclamation of self-worth. But it can strategically flatten questions of subjectivity to the collective (with “nation” as the shorthand for that collective), or stop at denouncing the Western bourgeois concern that subjects living in postcolonial societies neither have the economic security nor the cultural need to pursue such questions. In emphasising the necessity of forging national unity in societies divided by ethnic, religious, tribal, or linguistic differences, Benita Parry’s consideration of subjectivity, for example, focuses on the political as an indispensable tool in creating collectivist nationalist action. Her astute analysis nevertheless by-passes a contradiction this generates: if indeed revolutionary vanguardism on behalf of disparate groups was necessary, as she traces, where could the “[people’s] voluntary and autonomous agency” (which presumes political consciousness) before the fact come about? (2002, 140)

Meanwhile, Imre Szeman’s defence of nation as essential to an understanding of the literature of the decolonising world asks that nation be re-conceptualised so as to “be able to assess the way in which ‘literature’ acts as the ‘spiritual’ dimension of the nation in the absence of a unique national language” (2003, 48). This is an intriguing interpretation that centres the act of writing and creativity to conceptualisations of

nationhood, but the vagueness of the term “spiritual” here makes it difficult to understand how this re-conceptualisation maps onto the political realities of nationalism in former colonies. Speaking of nation as a subject in itself is also suspect, particularly due to the gendered terms on which this is usually conceptualised – that is, the nation as woman and of men as her saviours. Far from centring women to conceptualisations of nation, “women’s position as independent, equal citizens in the nation is thwarted by the appropriation of ‘woman’ (and its related gendered significations) as a metonymy for ‘nation’” (Ray 2000, 123). These identifications parallel specifically gendered violence with the general suffering of the people and land under colonialism, and the narrative of decolonisation can take on on masculinist symbolisms. Yet for all those literatures considered in this project, where such a conflation of nation and woman may be in operation (Ngũgĩ’s *A Grain of Wheat*, for example), many works — especially the Markandaya and Emecheta — suggest women are far from mere depositories of the “traditional”, but agents themselves in oppressive circumstances brought about largely through their respective national bourgeoisies.

Sympathetic to this materialist work, I nevertheless seek to open up some of the above concerns by revisiting Fanon for his dialectical perspective on subjectivity. Despite the above limitations to conceptualising subjectivity as related in some way to “nation”, for example, the role of “national consciousness” (Fanon 1961) is certainly entwined with the processes of decolonisation, both structural and psychosocial. Historic decolonisation were multi-faceted processes of political, social, and economic dimensions, but also had psychic emancipation components that, as my above reading of *Masks* has sought to highlight, were inseparable from anti-colonial struggle. As such, in Christoph Kalter’s interpretation,

“decolonisation was a national(ist) project, responding to the specific situation of each colonized collective, but also a transnational reality, a movement of solidarity transcending the boundaries of what Fanon referred to as the Third World” (2013, 28).

This is a frequently made and well-founded reading of what Lazarus has termed Fanon's "nationalitarianism" (though Kalter's summary suggests that this was the usage in which Fanon already uses the "national"). Through the crucial addition of "consciousness" (a term of both political and psychological applications) to the "national", Fanon moves towards reconciling what may therefore be broadly observed as two accounts of the self in post-independence texts – the relational, world-embracing version that participates in the collective or national, and the autonomous, inward one that may sometimes exercise agency in opposition to the collective. In *Wretched*, this duality is not a problem, but a tension that calls up the question of consciousness – and the transformative results anti-colonial struggle can have upon it. It is not necessarily the fact of an independent nation being built that will put into motion collective and individual transformation. Only through every citizen "appropriating for themselves [*s'approprié*]" the work of nation-building can "form and body be given to that consciousness". Fanon uses the example of the bridge that might as well not be built if it is a rote activity: if the collective work of building it changes nothing within the very subjectivities of those who laboured over it (141). In other words, although anti-colonial struggle also entails the reclamation of subjecthood for the colonised who have hitherto been reduced to object within a colonialist ontology, this self *also* emerges as a rejection of colonialism's logic that the drive for individualism is the *de facto* determinant of a "free" subject.

Fanon's polemical tone in this chapter of *Wretched* is particularly strong, which has often had scholarship cautioning that this urgency is due to the immediacy of the context of Algerian national liberation at the time he dictated it. But this does not mean we should understand Fanon's national consciousness as some kind of shorthand for national feeling or identity. It is the form and body that people's work takes: work that has and continues to transform people's very subjectivities as they undertake it together, in order to continuously (re)make their material world against and alongside the structural forces acting upon them (capitalism, neocolonialism, patriarchy, traditional customs, environmental changes, spiritual guidelines, kinship norms, etc). Historian Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has taken issue with Fanon's emphasis here on novelty and the

re-/newly made, encapsulated by his assertion that a “new man” (1961, 21) is the inevitable result of the wholesale anti-colonial mobilisation of a society. Azoulay’s caution is an important one when approaching the relationship between subjectivity and decolonisation through Fanon, for it highlights how calls for new beginnings can often serve to enhance and reproduce hegemonic violence. “When he described the ‘new humanity’ heralded by the Algerian struggle for independence,” Azoulay argues, “Fanon implied that previous generations’ struggles, which might even have started before the conquest of Algeria in 1830, the various enclaves they created and protected from their oppressors, and their aspirations, are actually inferior, and he considers it the natural progression of revolutionary struggle” (2019, 685) for the “new” to erase them. For Azoulay, resisting imperialism can also look like “resist[ing] the way ‘progress’ turns modes of life, practice, and experience into a disposable past” (685). As such, an emphasis on the singularity and novelty of the anti-colonial momentum that preceded national independence, which I agree is found in Fanon, is problematically inclined to conceptualise the new “as that which gives license to destroy other options and make them appear outmoded, obsolete, archaic, anachronistic, defunct” (687).

However, Fanon’s impatience with pre-independence modes of resistance – which undoubtedly, as Azoulay stresses, accumulated to contribute in one way or another to the many forms of revolutionary political consciousness in the mid-twentieth century global South – although myopic, does not annul the possibilities of *disassembly* within independence struggle. Re-constituting the self and the collective in ways until then delineated by the colonial imaginary, the nature and function of disassembly is important to several texts within this study, often alongside those “other options” besides national identity for a decolonised future, like pan-Africanisms. It is visible especially in those texts that narrativise the past in order to look back on their respective nations’ trajectory of decolonisation. The character of Debbie Ogedemgbe in Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* (1982), for instance, resists the Federal, Biafran and British status quos as she strives towards the resolution of the civil war in ways dictated by her own means, values and experience. As such, she undergoes significant changes in her very subjectivity in terms of disassembly: one example being that she goes from

embodying her own class position through a sense of responsibility to lead Nigerian women by example, to one that instead understands this position through a debt. By the end of the novel, she believes that she owes use of the resources of her class, like literacy, to refugee women, without dictating how they should use it.

This disassembly may also be facilitated by the revival of societal or ethno-racial bonds, wherein common ground is recuperated for political organisation. *Négritude* was one such idea that held important possibilities for a broader identity reclamation. Even though its nativist strain was problematic for many Africans and Caribbeans like Wole Soyinka and Keorapetse Kgositsile, it is an example of the kind of self-reconstitution that attempted to challenge the objectification so part and parcel of the psychic legacy of colonial subjugation.²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, too, emphasises that the assertion of humanity by the colonised against the coloniser crucially includes a consciousness and amplification of cultural difference as a means of asserting subjecthood in the face of unrelenting objectification: “[In the colonial situation] behaviour [is] implicitly invested with the function of *signs*, the refusal to adhere to a Western civilisation identified with the colonial order, the will to assert a radical and irreducible difference, to deny the negation of self, to defend a besieged personality” (2008, 9). Bourdieu makes a valuable point about war-era Algerians’ emphasis on cultural difference functioning as a sign: a reminder of their separateness from the coloniser and the *pied-noirs*, and a cultural challenge to France. But he also makes a generalisation when he suggests customary Algerian practices in clothing and social relations were in this way heightened in degree to meet the extraordinary pressures that colonisation puts native culture under, suggesting long-standing Algerian and/or North African Islamic practices were reactions to French colonialism and culture. That said, this discursive and cultural pressure is real, and we know it went hand in hand with colonialism’s military and economic interventions (Fanon’s “Algeria Unveiled” essay is especially illustrative of this). As such, interpreting Bourdieu’s observation as one

²⁴ Soyinka’s remark in 1964 at a conference in Berlin encapsulated well his disagreement with *Négritude*’s tenets – “A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces” – although a recent lecture at the SOAS African Literatures Conference argued for a recuperation of some of its ideas with modifications (Soyinka 2017).

example of a colonial reality is helpful here: it gestures to the distortion of social behaviour in both the coloniser and colonised, making the actions of each performative and/or reactive for the other, to a degree.

Like *Négritude*, however, this assertion comes with problems: namely, that this strategic emphasis on cultural difference on the part of a specific peoples engaged in a specific war of liberation from colonialism is taken as *de facto* anti-colonial resistance. Such emphases on cultural difference, including *Négritude*, is taken into consideration for both its pitfalls and potentials (with regards to transforming societies after independence) in several of the texts in this study. For instance, the protagonist in Sembène's *Xala* (1978) hides his class remove from the people he professes to serve by picking and choosing which customary Wolof practices he will adopt; he opts, of course, for polygamy, and proclaims this a cultural return to “Africanity”. Equally important is the assertion that other texts in this study make with regards to the fact that certain customs, in collective welfare, spirituality and sexuality, have for colonised peoples always existed as part of what Azoulay terms their “lifeworlds” (2019), shaping their social and economic relations regardless of whether they also happened to be politically useful in asserting their cultural difference from a coloniser. In *A Grain of Wheat*, for example, several characters draw succour for different reasons from the Gĩkũyũ creation myth, which becomes an anchoring narrative of guidance for situations ranging from agricultural to marital strife. These everyday practices that shape subjectivities, politicised as they are by the coloniser’s attempts to eradicate and manage them, create conditions in which subjectivity has collective rather than just individual stakes. The crises of subjectivity experienced by *Xala*’s France-aspiring bourgeois protagonist, for instance, carries material consequences for the new Senegalese nation-state; Gĩkũyũ cosmology, meanwhile, has an everyday relevance for *Wheat*’s characters, which allows them to situate their individual states of subjective malaise within a history of survival and resistance that pre-dates but includes the Mau Mau Uprising (1952–1960), during which Ngugi’s novel is partially set.

These porous lines between subjectivity and material conditions is where, for Bourdieu as for Fanon, revolutionary consciousness may develop. Indeed, to neutralise conceptions of subjectivity other than the bourgeois individual subject that disrupted colonial structures of citizenship and control, French colonial policy even “acknowledged the naked right of the colonized as individual – divested of cultural differences – to be identified as a citizen of the republic”, as in Algeria (Bhabha 2004, xxiv). The “native” as an individual subject is acceptable, even encouraged, where their outright de-humanisation may no longer be strategically advantageous to “a dying colonialism” (Fanon 1959). But, crucially, this tactic ensures that “the colonized citizen is prevented from exercising his or her collective and communal agency... as a culturally clothed subject who may not conform to the norms and practices of French civil society” (Bhabha 2004, xxiv). Thus the relationship between subjectivity and resistance can remain delineated by hegemonic powers with (neo-/)colonial agendas in ways that mobilise the individual as a phenomenon separate and even oppositional to the social collectivity within which it is situated. This especially served the purpose of particularising and individualising dissent when oppressed populations, as in the Algeria example, began to assert their political and cultural desires. Resonating clearly with Fanon’s warning that “the colonialist bourgeoisie hammered into the colonized mind the notion of a society of individuals where each is locked in his subjectivity, where wealth lies in thought” (1961, 11), several of the texts in this project demonstrate how neocolonial material and discursive forces, such as corruption in Armah’s novel or displacement in Ghatak’s film, foster acquiescence where critical thought is required and individualism where collective solidarity is needed.

I proceed with the above in mind – that is, not intending to suggest in this discussion that subjecthood in the sense of individual difference from the cultural norms of the (neo-/)colonial order is, in itself, resistance. Although characters in the texts here considered do refuse to conform to the economic, social and political structures they find themselves in, I do not contend that they therefore add to the tradition of postcolonial criticism that “resuscitates the subject by producing it as a subversive, resisting, and disruptive agency... [overlooking] the fact that hegemonic structures tend

as easily to produce difference through the very mechanisms that guarantee equivalence” (Chaudhary 2012, 153). Individual difference is rarely, if ever, treated in these eight texts as an indication of political consciousness; Armah’s *Beautiful Ones* perhaps comes closest to depicting a character whose refusal to perform the social behaviours expected of him results in a generative kind of politics (though Armah suggests throughout that his protagonist’s social isolation is paralysing, not liberating). As I have tried to trace above via Fanon, it is instead lived experience (which includes the psychosocial effects of the economic) that, rather than enshrining unassimilable difference as resistance, enables subjectivities that transform towards political consciousness, which precedes action. Or, as Bourdieu articulates, resistance transforms the material everyday of the world, to the transformation of one’s very subjectivity: “the social field in which everyday behaviour takes place as been radically modified, and by the same token the attitudes of individuals placed in this situation towards the situation itself” (2008, 8). Simply change within the self is not alone a politics capable of challenging structural oppression, but in Ambalavaner Sivanandan’s words, “The self is also in the world and so the world changes with the changing of the self and the self with it” (Sivanandan 2019, 34), highlighting that “change within the self” exists within and happens alongside social and political struggle. Any politics of anti-colonial resistance would discount the effects of structures upon subjectivities at its own peril.

III

This relation between self and world, and the tensions that it entails in a neocolonial world yet to be transformed, are precisely what the novels and films in this study unpack in all of their diversity. In the literary and cinematic texts of the post-independence decades we can see that this (as yet rather conceptual) formulation actually grounds their narratives in very practical terms: characters either arrive at consciousness of their neocolonial conditions, or embody (and perpetuate) false consciousness by facilitating or remaining blind to them. As diverse as the socio-cultural contexts and geographies of Ayi Kwei Armah, Ousmane Sembène, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Buchi Emecheta, Kamala Markandaya, Satyajit Ray, Souleymane Cissé and

Ritwik Ghatak are, their writings and films contain such a conception of selfhood in their characterisations, themes, and forms. These post-independence texts offer ways to navigate the notion I have arrived at above via Fanon – that, so long as there is shared (subjective) experience of common material conditions, there is the possibility of real change through people’s “practical actions [*action concrète*]” (Fanon 1961, 190).

In the texts chapters two to five consider, the constant negotiation of the contradictions and paradoxes that arise within their characters’ everyday lives (wherein old and new forms of colonialism operate in intersection with patriarchy, caste, and more) means conditions for resistance and creativity are fostered even alongside false consciousness. Through narrativising the trials, contradictions, failures, and hopes of the independence periods in their respective countries, these texts seek to understand how things have ended up as they are. From this position of situatedness, they ask the question: can new modes of individual and collective existence still be imagined, given the colonality of the independent nation-state?²⁵ In exploring this question through the myriad issues it raises – from gender to conflict, memory to place – the works situate subjectivity as a material phenomenon that is effected by and effects change on the world, and as a terrain of transformation crucial to “a good decolonisation, without aftermath” (Césaire 1959, 126).

²⁵ I define “nation” here as a concept of shared community that can “be imagined without linguistic communality” (Anderson 1983, 123) but which can nevertheless be, in Fanon’s sense (discussed on pages 20-23), a political community of people, whilst having constructed (Brennan 1989) and some derivative (Chatterjee 1993) elements. Positioning “state” as a political entity, typically with a level of government that is sovereign, I understand “nation-state” as the state structured in the national form that, in Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein’s conception, intervenes “in the very reproduction of the economy and particularly in the formation of individuals” (1991, 90).

Chapter Two

Gendering Anti-Colonial Nationalism: The “Problem” of Women’s Subjectivities in Satyajit Ray’s *Home and the World* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*

The contexts of Fanon’s analyses that I discuss in Chapter One to elucidate his materialist approach to subjectivity inform post-independence periods too, despite principally concerning those of the colonial situation. This is unsurprising, as “all postcolonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved this problem” (Ashcroft et al. 1995, 2). Yet this is not to say the building and sustaining of anti-colonial momentum up to and beyond independence had no socially transformative effects. Nationalisms of various kinds played a key role, while also laying the groundwork for some of the social and political problems postcolonial nation-states saw after independence. The Janus-faced attributes and processes of anti-colonial nationalisms have already been examined (Said 1993; Chrisman 2003; Barrington 2006; Spivak 2009). In this chapter, I am interested in how these processes also played out on the terrain of subjectivity. What I mean by this is evoked by Chinua Achebe in a 1975 essay, where he writes: “the nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War brought about a mental revolution which began to reconcile us to ourselves” (145). A “mental revolution” and a “reconciliation with oneself” rings of Fanon’s conceptualisation of the conditions that beget national consciousness. To recall, Fanon stresses these are also creative conditions – they can remake people altogether, in thought and psyche as much as in their politics and actions, thus “creat[ing] a real dialectic between [the] body and the world” (Fanon 2008, 83). Relatedly, Achebe here singles out the revolutionary impact nationalist movements could have at the “mental” level, therefore possibly going a great way in bringing about what he calls “a reconciliation with oneself”, and what Fanon calls disalienation.

In light of this, the lived experience and subjective effects of anti-colonial nationalisms are themes grappled with time and time again in several post-independence texts. Thinking with Chapter One's theorisations, this section will consider how these dynamics manifest in one novel and one film, both of which centre anti-colonial nationalisms. The 1967 novel *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the 1984 film *Home and the World (Ghare Baire)* by Satyajit Ray, within their particular contexts of independent Kenya and India respectively, acknowledge the complex but politically urgent necessity of questioning those anti-colonial nationalisms that they themselves either partook of (Ngũgĩ) or at least are sympathetic to (Ray). Via narratives that trace how material conditions and subjective experience both pivot upon the issue of political consciousness, they reveal the gendered circumscribing of that consciousness. Attending to subjectivity as the location of that political consciousness, I read anti-colonial nationalism in these two post-independence texts for the relationship it reveals between itself, gender, and subjectivity.

To do this, I will first discuss how the mentally "revolutionary" (Achebe 1975, 145) potential of anti-colonial nationalisms in these texts rely on an understanding of subjectivity as a relational and historicisable thing: in other words, a Fanonian one, which relies on his aforementioned "dialectic between [the] body and the world" (Fanon 1952, 83). But such a historical process, I then contend, is denied Ngũgĩ's female characters in *Wheat*, whereas the novel's male protagonists Gikonyo and Mugo arrive at both political consciousness and community re-integration after the anti-colonial struggle. This impossibly suggests women's subjectivities are something outside or other than what the novel's dialectical vision has thus far established through its male characters' development – that history informs subjectivity, which is then further shaped by the embodied experience of one's material conditions. But in *Home and the World*, adapted by Ray from Rabindranath Tagore's 1919 novella, the protagonist's small shifts in consciousness are held up as consequential. They are shown to be borne of her lived experience of how those forces supposedly of the "outside" world, like the politics of the Second Swadeshi Movement (1905–1917) during which the story is set, are always

already of the home. Considering the “excess” of textiles and props in the film, I will suggest these anxieties about separate socio-sexual spheres are not just about how to reorganise life at home to suit the emergence of India as a bourgeois-capitalist nation-state. From Sandip’s Pompadour cigarettes and Bimala’s Anglicised saris to the piano where English and Swadeshi songs are played, the “home” – where women’s subjectivities supposedly are formed and remain delineated by – provides direct access to nation-history in the making, with all of its contradictions specific to the Indian context. In other words, the home provides access to the potential for subjectivities to be shaped by those very same material conditions that galvanise, according to the male characters, nationalist consciousness out there in the “world”. However, Ray’s adaptation closes with a darker ending than the original Tagore story. The heroine Bimala’s tragic fate suggests women’s political consciousness, even under anti-colonial nationalism, is punishable if it grows to understand where such nationalisms have vested interests in capitalism and patriarchy.²⁶

A Grain of Wheat also builds a relation between anti-colonial nationalism, gender and subjectivity, but implicitly. Looking back in order to present narratives from the pre-independence struggle draws Ngũgĩ’s interest to questions specific to the trajectory of decolonisation in Kenya: particularly why constitutional freedom had not meant the transformation of society, and what the uses and limits of nationalism are. The novel sees men like Mugo and Gikonyo eventually realise that their subjective wellbeing rests on historicising their traumas; only by doing so do they see that fulfilling their responsibilities towards community also equals psychic healing. They are rewarded with reintegration into society (Mugo) and family life (Gikonyo), respectively. But the subjectivities of female characters who are vital for the recuperation of the kind of collective and personal anti-colonial history traced above are neither entirely realised within Ngũgĩ’s framework of formative collective histories, nor are their actions integrated fully into the story’s dialectical vision of liberation. This is not to say Ngũgĩ

²⁶ My use of patriarch(y/al) throughout recognises, as per Rosemary Hennessey and Chrys Ingraham’s materialist feminist definition, that “although not exclusively bound by or peculiar to capitalism... the historical forms [patriarchal] practices take are not independent of capitalism either” (1997, 11).

espouses the nationalism of the native male elite: he denounces throughout *Wheat* (and is jailed a decade after this novel for it) that “in Kenya, during the Mau Mau insurrection no known nationalist claimed he was a member of the movement or attempted to defend it” (Fanon 1961, 71). His novel asserts people carry an accumulation of multiple histories, with interiority amongst other things a key resource to draw on during political struggle. But in thus conceiving of selfhood as fully embodied and fully knowable only via interrelated histories, it leaves women's subjectivities unincorporated into this relation.

As such, Fanon and Ngũgĩ's historicised understanding of subjectivity is also discernible in *Home and the World*, but with some differences regarding the status of national consciousness. Ray's film presents the troubling ease with which nationalist feeling can serve as a cover-up for the class frustrations of Indian male elites, and how this is often performed upon and via women. Tagore's text enacts social anxieties about lines being blurred as a result of the production of the “new” Indian woman at the turn of the century, but it does not solve them. In Ray's adaptation, Bimala's growing political consciousness leads her to act in a way that rejects both her husband Nikhil's Enlightenment liberalism (by committing to the nationalist movement), and her lover Sandip's provocation-as-politics (by refusing to sacrifice Sandip's protégé Amulya). *Home and the World* and *Wheat* illustrate how an anti-colonial nationalism that denies women's political consciousness, as expedited by their own embodied experiences of the material world, undermines its own power to help “reconcile us to ourselves” (Achebe 1975, 145) after colonialism.

I

In Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat*, published barely one decade after the Kenyan Emergency, the charged relationship between anti-colonial nationalism and gender is latent; it requires, to a degree, reading against the grain of Ngũgĩ's main narrative preoccupations in the novel, working both “strategically within, and against, the

dominant symbolisms of *A Grain of Wheat* and the marginalia of Mau Mau histories in order to discover the spaces that these texts make available to a female sexual and revolutionary subject” (Nicholls 2010, 115). Featuring flashbacks and diversions into 150 years of Kenyan history but focusing most prominently on the liberation struggle of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (“Mau Mau”), *Wheat* takes place four days before Independence in 1963 and leads up to the Uhuru celebrations that will honour the fallen fighters of the anti-colonial struggle. In the novel, various histories (including Gĩkũyũ and Christian myths) are woven into the ongoing rhythms of daily life, informing the subjectivities of its characters and their relationships with one other. Several of them grapple with the psychic afterlives of the Emergency, struggling to reconcile their personal traumas with the collective narrative of victory.

Ngũgĩ’s vision of the Kenyan anti-colonial nationalist struggle and beyond is itself a complex and at times contradictory one. On the one hand, the novel belongs amongst an African literature that Ngũgĩ himself thinks was “really a series of imaginative footnotes to Frantz Fanon” (1993, 67); on the other, critics have pointed out that this period of his writing was engaged in a more multi-dimensional manner with questions of political and social transformation after independence (Breidlid 2002, 17). Ngũgĩ has addressed why the latter may seem so by drawing attention to *Wheat*’s context as one of a global political transition that was difficult to understand without the benefit of hindsight: “the [African] writer in this period was still limited by his inadequate grasp of the full dimension of what was really happening in the sixties: the international and national realignment of class forces and class alliances” (1986, 11). *Wheat*’s multi-dimensionality reflects this mercurial decade: it seeks to articulate the principle of community unity, but also foregrounds the lasting effects of the violence of the Kenyan Emergency on individual psyches. It argues decolonisation is only possible if cycles of betrayal are disrupted, and yet gives us characters who cannot move past having betrayed or been betrayed. And it “critically investigate[s] the links between nativist politics and hegemonic masculinities” (Hammond 2011, 115), yet cannot move its dialectical understanding of history beyond certain patriarchal supports. This last element interests me in particular, because therein we find Ngũgĩ’s approach to

subjectivity as an accumulation of history, inflected with the particular interiority that results from one's embodied experience of material conditions. That is where the novel also grapples with how to incorporate women's subjectivities into this conception.

A Grain of Wheat both proposes women as Kenyan men's moral saviours, and proposes that Kenyan malehood, emasculated by colonialism, must be (re)instated into a new/old masculinity that shall transform the nation. I use new/old simultaneously here because the novel has, with reason, been read for its attempts to reimagine Gĩkũyũ malehood in new ways that serve social healing and nation building (Harrow 1985; Hammond 2011). However, when Gĩkũyũ women's historical experience and political consciousness enters the picture, the project of a new masculinity frequently reverts to a defence of the "old" Gĩkũyũ masculinity, a traditional one that was undone when they became "unwilling husbands to Queen Elizabeth" (Ngũgĩ 1967, 137). Several critics have already read that gender is a blind spot in Ngũgĩ's revolutionary vision, but for reasons as different from one another as Elleke Boehmer's (2005), who argues this is due to Ngũgĩ's accentuation of class at the expense of gender, and Peter Mwikisa's (2010), who argues this is because "Ngũgĩ [is] ultimately grappling with issues of his Christian faith rather than advancing Marxist-style revolution". Agreeing broadly with Boehmer's observation, I add that we must utilise a critical lens that incorporates the novel's approach to history and subjectivity in order to understand the full implications of this gender blind spot. I propose the novel's attempt to position Gĩkũyũ women as both the moral facilitators of post-independence reconciliation, *as well as* symbols via which Gĩkũyũ male subjectivities may be re-configured, results in the dissonance of its dialectical vision of the process from individual to community: a process that lies at the heart of the novel's understanding of decolonisation.

There are several inroads into examining how gender is key to understanding the twinned issues of subjectivity and decolonisation in this novel. First, I will explore how Gĩkũyũ anti-colonialism in *Wheat* reifies the supposedly defining attributes (especially reproductivity) of women for its use. This it does both within patriarchal lines as "outside" the historic struggle, and within nationalist lines as the moral future of the

nation, while being at a loss as to how to incorporate the actual women who participated in its cause beyond this temporally bound struggle. This, I argue, is because the novel's female characters demonstrate a political consciousness that understands colonial oppression; the oppressions of patriarchy; *and* a female lineage of resistance, in their intersections. Women's subjectivities, in the context of the Mau Mau Uprising and independence periods depicted in the novel, have epistemological privileges that challenge both colonialism and patriarchal Gĩkũyũ nationalism.

Secondly, I will consider Ngũgĩ's female characters with an eye towards tracing how women acting with consciousness in order to intervene in and transform their material realities proves difficult for the novel to reconcile with its narrative of national becoming, and its vision of a correspondingly renewed masculinity. In being presented as driven either by the exclusively political-heroic (Wambui, Mary Nyanjiru) or exclusively the sexual-romantic (Njeri, Mumbi), these women's actions are overdetermined so as to remain legible within *Wheat's* world. These two types of possible "rationales" for the four women's choices are also divided according to age, in keeping with the novel's privileging of reproduction as *the* key experience that informs women's subjectivities. That the latter are also shaped by political experiences (often overlooked in contexts of anti-colonial struggle as "personal" or "everyday" experiences), which in turn can and do translate into political consciousness, is not fully imaginable in Ngũgĩ's novel within its patriarchal anti-colonial paradigm. There are some clear resonances between this movement towards political consciousness between *Wheat's* female characters and *Home and the World's*. However, where Ray specifically illustrates how Bimala exposes the class envy behind Sandip's nationalism, Ngũgĩ's novel interprets Gĩkũyũ women's actions within the framework of a nationalism that pursues revolutionary aims only insofar as Gĩkũyũ masculinity remains intact.

II

Gender and sexuality are instrumentally employed for nation-building, including within the narratives of national becoming and of (failures of) decolonisation in the post-independence era. *Wheat* often configures women's bodies as sites of male reconciliation and national salvation. It does so with what can even be read as an investment in women as society's depositories of a latent reconciliatory potential. As Boehmer points out, "It is by singling out female voices, by fixing women beneath the evaluative epithets 'vibrant' and 'beautiful', that Ngũgĩ gives way to that tendency to objectify women which qualifies his attempt to grant them a leading role in the revolutionary struggle for Kenyan liberation" (2005, 42). That Mumbi, for example, "arous[es] other characters to a better knowledge of themselves" (Sharma 1984, 207) and "is the catalyst that prompts [Mugo] to public confession" (Nnolim 1984, 219) cannot be disentangled from the gendered configurations — fertility, maternity, femininity, nation-as-Woman — on which Ngũgĩ's novel's vision rests. From this critique of the reification of Mumbi, however, a related but possibly more foundational problem in *Wheat* is discernible regarding the exclusion of female characters from the narrative's key arc: that of arrival at self-knowledge and communal healing after the individual-psychological and collective-social traumas of colonialism. This exclusion not only rests aspects of Ngũgĩ's political vision on patriarchal supports, which critics like Boehmer and others have already noted, but it excludes women from the relation between historicity and selfhood that facilitates *Wheat's* politics.

To examine this problem, we first need to look to how the novel conceives of subjectivity as an accumulation of collective history and lived experience. Ngũgĩ builds this throughout the narrative via dialogue, motifs, symbols and recurring themes. Both recent (Emergency-era) history and distant history (Gĩkũyũ and biblical mythologies) are consistently woven into the ongoing rhythms of daily life in the village of Thabai. Reiterating the recent collective past becomes a means of both individual disalienation and of the forging of solidarity through common cause: "Karanja and others collected [in Gikonyo's workshop] in the evenings, hurled curses and defiance in the air, and reviewed with pride the personal histories of the latest men to join Kihika" (Ngũgĩ 1967, 101). Homosocial relations are cemented through the recalling of recent history,

which allows *Wheat*'s male characters to both reassure one another of their loyalty to the cause, and undertake the kind of liberatory work Fanon attributes to disalienation ("for black men disalienation will come from refusing to consider their reality as definitive" (1952, 201). This scene, wherein the men in a sense substantiate their subjectivities through the oral retelling of a lineage of Gĩkũyũ resistance, also recalls Fanon's theorisation in *Masks* as to where the "raw material" (113) for processes of disalienation may be found. After all, from where is this subjectivity to be forged, since some essentialising "Blackness" (that is, the colonial construct) must also be refused? Ngũgĩ here appears to make the Fanonian case, gesturing to the relational and accumulative experiencing of shared histories as the raw material.

The male characters' collective emotional investment in the trial of the Kapenguria Six also functions in this way. Facing the sham trial's predictable outcome galvanises the detainees in the British prison camp out of their strained psychological state and into acts of both political and psychological resistance. From hiding their shame about their individual disappointment and pain, they begin to re-define what it means to share this wrenching experience: "In the day they avoided talking about Jomo... they refused to look into one another's eyes in order not to read what the other was thinking. [...] Then one night, suddenly, they believed the news, all of the detainees to a man. They did not say their belief to one another, it was only that they gathered together in their compounds and sang" (Ngũgĩ 1967, 104). The inmates sing the Gĩkũyũ creation myth, *Gĩkũyũ na Mumbi / Nikihiu ngwatiro*, in answer to the so-called justice delivered by the colonial courts. The connection between past and present, performed through song and the collective memory it sustains, reassures the men's political loyalty and psychic health at a time when "the whiteman just wants to break [them] with lies" (103). Although some members of the Kapenguria Six, who hoisted the Kenyan flag on independence day, have been excluded completely from politics and the public domain by successive regimes since, Mbugua wa Wungai stresses that "the identities and poses assumed by the founding fathers have had a significant bearing on how successive generations of Kenyans have viewed themselves and others" (2010, 58). Writing in the first decades of the Kenyatta era, Ngugi underlines the political charge of the memory

of the verdict on the Kapenguria Six by paralleling it with Gĩkũyũ myth. The news helps the inmates “look into one another’s eyes,” encountering the same shame-inducing desire for psychological normalcy over political martyrdom. Thus, they realise the individual psychic distress they are feeling is a result of shared conditions: it is a deliberate function of the prison to wear down their emotional resilience.

Christian mythology also grounds the novel’s idea that the self is a depository of shared histories. Brendon Nicholls interprets this as Ngũgĩ’s “residual sympathy towards Christianity and individualism,” which “problematizes Ngũgĩ’s Marxian sympathies, because the fictional representatives of collective resistance emerge only as savage killers (Gen. R) or rapists (Koinandu) or self-styled Messianic heroes (Kihika)” (2010, 87). Nicholls does not elaborate on why the two (Christianity and individualism) are analogous. In fact, Ngũgĩ’s choice of biblical myths are distinctly informed by ones that *also* help illustrate an anti-individualist conception of personal freedom. This in turn feeds into, rather than problematizes, his Marxism. For instance, in a scene describing the Uhuru celebrations, biblical parallels are written into the community’s recitation of recent political history: “They sang of Jomo (he came, like a fiery spear among us), his stay in England (Moses sojourned in the land of Pharaoh) and his return (he came riding on a cloud of fire and smoke) to save his children” (214). Kihika is also a clear Christ-like figure. Despite occasionally bordering on messianic declarations, he frequently adopts biblical myth into not only an anti-individualist but also a materialist understanding of colonial Kenya: “Can’t you see that Cain was wrong? I am my brother’s keeper. Take your whiteman, anywhere, in the settled area. He owns hundreds and hundreds of acres of land. What about the black men who sweat dry on the farms to grow coffee, tea, sisal, wheat and yet only get ten shillings a month?” (96) Kihika’s strong personal Christian faith is inevitably the prism through which he chooses to locate and understand how he, as one man, is connected to the justice that must be delivered all Kenyans. Ngũgĩ’s incorporation of Kihika’s individual lens on a shared history is not the same as an emphasis on individualism; it remains within the dialectic of the novel.

With this dialectic established between subjectivity and history — the groundwork of the radical vision in the novel — *Wheat*, however, withholds the same accumulative and relational subjectivity from its female characters. Where the above-described conception of (resistance) history should result in the narrative presenting us women's subjectivities of a similar historicity, they are instead reified. This re-routes what could have been a radical politics of anti-colonial solidarity in the novel: one that recognises the individual psychological and material effects of colonial domination not as individualistic preoccupations that jeopardise solidarity, but an important depository of experience that informs collective resistance.

III

One way this re-routing occurs is through the novel's reliance on the positioning of "Woman" as sign with the function of making or breaking male bonds. As a disembodied symbol that can take on various meanings, Mumbi serves as a stand-in for memories and hopes in conversations that facilitate the relationship between Gatu and Gikonyo, and Mugo and Gikonyo. During their detention, we are told Gikonyo felt "the terrible bond being established between [Gatu and himself]. He struggled against this but in the end gave up, so that it was he who first opened his heart to Gatu" (107). This confession centres around Mumbi, or rather, around all the imaginative weight Gikonyo has assigned her. Through recounting their marital bliss, Gikonyo is confessing, via the sign that is Mumbi/Woman, his feelings of guilt about the fact that the fantasy of returning to domestic life, rather than a vision of Kenya's political freedom, is what sustains him throughout their imprisonment. This facilitates a bond between two men, who share many characteristics that Ngũgĩ seems to be proposing for the new, revolutionary Gĩkũyũ masculinity; these include (for him) the most important aspects of traditional Gĩkũyũ masculinities, such as sexual potency and community loyalty, whilst also allowing for (or forgiving) vulnerability and emotionality. When Gatu answers Gikonyo's confession with a disclosure of his own about a missed opportunity at marriage — where, again, Woman functions as symbol of "all our losses for the cause"

— Gikonyo thinks, “weak, weak like any of us” (108) of the man he had once admired for what had looked like his purely ideological motivations. The having of a Woman and the loss of her (rather, all she symbolises: the assurance of manhood, patrilineal futurity, and the means of psychological and sexual relief) at first bonds, and then breaks apart, the two men fighting for a common political cause. “Woman” becomes both the means of and an explanation for the greater psychic nuance and self-awareness of Ngũgĩ’s male characters.

In this sense, Gikonyo’s “reformed” masculinity is much like that of Nikhil’s in Ray’s *Home and the World*. In the original Tagore story, there is a dichotomy constructed between Sandip’s “bad” nationalism and Nikhil’s “good” nationalism, the latter of which partially consists of a marked difference in the kinds of masculinity they seem to embody. Tagore’s Nikhil frames his desire that Bimala emerge out of *purdah* as an act of enlightened reason: “Here you are wrapped up in me. You know neither what you have, nor what you want [...] I would have you come into the outer world and meet reality” (2004, 23). Nikhil’s “masculinity” is never questioned thanks to his *bhadralok* social status and class power: his colonial education and land wealth calls for no displays of possessiveness or authority. Much like Gikonyo’s ability to negotiate his vulnerabilities without emasculation rests on the reduction of Mumbi/Woman to the sign that facilitates male friendship, Tagore’s Bimala functions as, in Ashis Nandy’s words, a kind of “embodied amalgam or link between (male) patriotisms” (1994, 14). Ray’s adaptation, however, draws attention to the contingency of any “new” masculinity, via the the latter’s continued investment in colonial capital – this will be expanded on further later.

In *Wheat*, that Mugo confesses his guilt to Mumbi before anyone else further renders her a means of male psychic healing. This could be read, as some critics have, as an empowering position. Sam Radithalo (2001) proposes that Ngũgĩ invites us to see this facilitatorship as a vital, though unequivocally gendered, role that benefits all of society. In his anthropological studies, Richard Werbner has also suggested how it is often the very undergoing of subjection which constitutes a “persuasively influential

and dignified female subject in postcolonial intersubjective relations” (2002, 8). The asymmetrical returns of this, however, are stark. Mugo’s subjectivity is constituted as a facilitator of reconciliation by others, on the basis of their incorrect assumption of his heroism. This is later resolved in Mugo’s narrative, who confesses his betrayal and subsequently feels “a load of many years was lifted” (Ngũgĩ 1967, 232). But Mumbi’s subjectivity is constituted by gendered symbolisations, and this is not recognised as warranting narrative resolution. Instead, it re-iterates that the epistemic privilege that results from subjugation makes women the “dignified and influential” guides, confidants and healers of men. Through women’s lived knowledges of psychic survival, interdependency and conflict management, men can practice disalienation without having paid its price.

This gets to the crux of why Mumbi becomes the site of the struggle between Gikonyo and Karanja, and the conflicting Kenyan masculinities and nationhoods they represent. In addition to the promise of healing and communal re-integration the having of Mumbi promises these men, she is also assigned the significance that land reclamation carries in the context of the Kenyan anti-colonial struggle. Land in the novel is not only symbolic of the geopolitical struggle in Kenya, but also of “the desire to enact male privilege” (Hammond 2011, 115). Ngũgĩ has long sustained in his work that “culture holds that land is the key to everything” (Gikandi 2000, 85). The reforms introduced with the Emergency had further consolidated this interdependence: in 1954 a government report had implemented the Swynnerton Plan, a colonial agricultural policy aimed at expanding cash-crop productions, concentrating land ownership towards the strategy of establishing a new middle class of loyalists in response to the Mau Mau Uprising. The result was that “a new Gikũyũ society was born – propertied and propertyless – and left to face an uncertain future in face of the politics of independence” (Ogot and Ochieng 1995, 25).

This relies upon establishing Mumbi’s body’s usefulness for nation-building, provided it is utilised for this purpose by the man with the “right” to do so. Otherwise, vassal-like, it could be claimed by the wrong kind — the individualistic and

opportunistic Karanja — and derail the future that the Gikūyū tradition of resistance has worked for. This idea reassures Gikonyo as he probes his mixed feelings of jealousy, guilt and love towards Mumbi as he is hospitalised with a broken leg at the end of the story. While contemplating where his marriage stands after Mumbi’s adultery with Karanja, and his own disproportionate rage, a “thought crept into his mind”, displacing the self-searching he has not yet finished doing with a political-sexual fantasy of quick resolution. “He had never seen himself as father to Mumbi’s children. Now it crossed his mind: what would his child by Mumbi look like?” (241). This diverts the irresolution of Gikonyo’s trauma and of Kenyan independence onto an image that places the onus of the creation of the nation’s future, literally and figuratively, upon the female body.

Much of this plays out in the novel via the delimiting of female subjectivity to childbearing and mothering capacities. This dehistoricises women’s experiences throughout *Wheat*, especially in light of the aforementioned relationship Ngūgĩ has been seeking to establish between history and subjectivity. Radithalo proposes reading the reification of female fertility in cultural feminist terms, arguing that we misinterpret Ngūgĩ’s “marked sensitivity to women as nationalists” if we miss the autonomy in the novel’s women’s sexual choices, like Mumbi’s choosing Gikonyo over Karanja (2001, 9). This could perhaps be true of *Home and the World*’s interest in the trope of Mother India. Bimala initially grows interested in Swadeshi nationalism through a classed kind of maternalism towards the tenant farmers who will suffer the most from any boycott on British goods: “Something has to be done. Even if it means hardship for the poor now, it will help them in the long run,” she insists in response to Nikhil’s qualms about joining Swadeshi.

However, a materialist feminist lens reaches conclusions different to those of a cultural feminism’s in reading women’s reproductive labour and ideology in *Wheat*. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham write that “the drift towards cultural feminism, which theorises women’s oppression in terms of culture, consciousness and ideology over how to explain the connection between patriarchy and capitalism, or the

links between women's domestic labor and ideology... has been a general transnational trend" in critical and literary theory (1997, 8), particularly around the 1990s and '00s, from where readings like Radithalo's emerge. But it is by focusing on the reification of female fertility in the novel that we can read the potential flip side to the seemingly empowering reconciliation between Mumbi and Gikonyo in the novel's finale. We are told that "[Mumbi] was now really aware of her independence. Gikonyo was surprised by the new firmness in her voice" (242). The implications of Mumbi being "really aware of her independence" are, however, overshadowed by the image that closes the novel. "I will carve a woman big — big with child" Gikonyo thinks to himself (243), and this prophetic pronouncement diverts from the woman with the "new firmness in her voice". That Gĩkũyũ women's experiences of the decades of anti-colonial resistance has facilitated within them a new political consciousness remains unthought, and perhaps unthinkable.

IV

I have above attempted to trace in the novel how "Woman" functions as a sign useful for homosocial relations, or a vassal for the reproduction of a certain kind of nationalism and masculinity. Complicating this, however, are its cast of female characters. Recalling Nicholls' (2010) proposition of an interested reading that must to an extent work strategically against the novel's dominant symbolisms, I find it is less useful to read this paradox as the author's self-contradiction than I do reading it strategically: as an irresolution potentially fruitful for understanding the complex triangulation between gender, subjectivity and history in the post-independence decades. As female characters move throughout Ngũgĩ's novel in ways that exceed the delineation and facilitation of "real" Gĩkũyũ masculinity — the function the narrative nudges them to serve — women's subjectivities themselves, as socially relational and historically accumulated things, become a problem.

Wangari, Gikonyo's mother, is an important character in this regard. Whereas Wanjiku, Mumbi's mother, admonishes her daughter for excessive pride when Mumbi goes back to her childhood home after Gikonyo slaps her, Wangari challenges her son and chooses solidarity with her daughter-in-law. "Wangari stood up and shook her front right finger at him. 'You. You. If today you were a baby crawling on your knees I would pinch your thighs so hard you would learn,'" she says when a raging Gikonyo returns home to find Mumbi gone (Ngũgĩ 1967, 172). Wangari sees through her son's rage and knows it to be a mixture of: his own disappointment at not finding the fantasy of the life with Mumbi that had sustained him during detention; a loss of his sense of self due to the trauma of torture; and a misplaced attempt to deal with the emasculating effects of both. This grows evident in how she repeatedly reminds Gikonyo that he alone is responsible for his rage: "Let us see what profit it will bring you, to go on poisoning your mind [...] Read your own heart, and know yourself" (172). In this novel (often considered the last of Ngũgĩ's "decolonisation" novels, before his work focused on critiques of neocolonialism), the chain of events have so far implicated all characters in the nation's making, regardless of their personal desires for non-involvement. But Wangari's intervention rings beyond its domestic context, throwing up a hurdle to this vision, which Ngũgĩ never quite chooses to take up in all its full depth. In not "knowing himself," Gikonyo cannot act in a (nation/)family-building manner. As a woman who can see that her son is yet holding onto "poison" within, Wangari questions something the novel recoils from asking: *did* what the male Mau Mau recruits go through during the Emergency indeed beget a revolutionary political consciousness?

Bethwell A. Ogot (2003) recounts how Mau Mau was not an exclusively Gĩkũyũ anti-colonial movement, and that Gĩkũyũ leaders who occupied positions of power after independence did not accept the radical agenda of the Mau Mau. A generalisation cannot be made about one "kind" of Mau Mau agenda, recruit, or experience. Evan Mwangi also notes that, while ethnicity and class have been touched upon by historians of the Mau Mau movement, "gender and sexuality as analytic categories in Kenyan historiography of decolonisation as presented in art have not been systematically explored" (2009, 90), and that this ignores the "role of affect and subjectivity in the

construction of an anti-hegemonic historiography of decolonisation” (90).

Notwithstanding these complexities around what Mau Mau was and how it continues to be understood, however, Wangari’s is a discomfiting but fundamental question to ask – especially for a novel that otherwise maintains that to live in, and for, community is the condition of both collective liberation and personal fulfilment. Wangari’s warning to Gikonyo implies those who fought the anti-colonial struggle still have a duty to look within — they cannot break with one another over the bitterness of past trauma and expect any social or emotional profit from it, nor think that the work of nation-building is divorced from their personal conduct.

It is imperative to the critical heft of *Wheat* that this promise of ontological re-alignment with others and commitment to (self-)transformation is asked foremost of the Kenyans in power, of course. Yet the work Wangari demands of Gikonyo is necessary too of the moral victors of the anti-colonial struggle: the Kenyan revolutionary peasantry. Whereas the Gĩkũyũ elite should be and are condemned for not having sacrificed much, the novel also gestures to the problem of the rank-and-file freedom fighters like Gikonyo and Mugo looking to undo their emasculating experience of detention by exercising violence on women. Interestingly, Ngũgĩ thus both strategically minimises the question of the Mau Mau men’s political consciousness, *and* he writes a peripheral female character who flags up the path of inquiry he has left untrodden. Individuals who are “involved in the active work of destroying an inhibitive social structure and building a new one begin to see themselves,” Ngũgĩ writes in *Homecoming* (1972, 10). Wangari’s call to the Gĩkũyũ man to “know [himself]” asks if the victors of the struggle really are building anew, or merely looking to the re-arrangement of hierarchies.

Njeri, Mumbi’s friend and Wambuku’s rival for Kihika’s affections, is also significant in that she is one of few in a story deeply occupied with the notion of loyalty — to oneself, to one’s community, and to anti-colonial struggle — who emerges perhaps faultless. Njeri, we are told, is cat-like (100), recalling both colonialist descriptions of African womanhood as animalistic, and the militant female whose

stealth proves an asset in anti-colonial guerrilla warfare. She taunts Kihika's lover Wambuku for expecting Kihika to choose to remain out of action. Instead, "letting loose her long-suppressed anger... [Njeri pledges,] 'I will come to you, my handsome warrior,' trembling with the knowledge that she had made an irrevocable promise to Kihika" (101). Honouring both her sexual and political promise, she joins Kihika in the forest and dies as Mau Mau. Decolonisation in the novel is a sacrificial project that involves the complex coming-to-terms with one's own betrayals of the cause, as part of the process. All can then emerge with a new consciousness, directing liberation towards its creative rather than confrontational energies. Where does this leave the subjectivity of a character like Njeri, whose actions we are told stem from "long-suppressed anger" towards the trappings of her gender on the one hand, and from her sexual desire for Kihika, on the other?

Njeri's loyalty and passions (which other characters like Gikonyo grapple with trying to sustain, then grapple with the humiliation of failing to) seem not to be the *right* kind for national becoming. She lives and dies with no trajectory towards a new consciousness, despite the above-discussed centrality of embodied experience to *Wheat's* conception of subjectivity. Indeed, Njeri's actions are written through the assumption of their stemming from the "wrong" place: a female rage that emasculates. Despite her reputation as a fighter preceding her knowledge of Wambuku and Kihika's relationship, the novel suggests her militancy arose out of sexual jealousy and competition: "[Njeri] felt superior and stronger and she could not help her contempt for Wambuku" (100). In contrast to Mumbi's function as facilitator of male-to-male relations, the novel's treatment of a militant woman, Njeri, uncovers the gendered politics of motivation. Whereas the narrative affirms that Mau Mau men's lived experiences – of land dispossession, torture and detainment at the hands of the British – beget the political consciousness that motivates resistance, it cannot approve of the same psychopolitical process in women. The combination of rage (at her social powerlessness), physical strength (as compensation for this powerlessness) and desire (for both Kihika the man and the ideal) that motivates Njeri's political participation is deemed inappropriate at a time when Gĩkũyũ masculinity is fragile.

Srila Roy's discussion of gender as central to the moral economy of radical political violence (in the context of the Naxalbari movement in India) is helpful in illuminating why Njeri's is configured as the "wrong" kind of anger and loyalty. "Given that women have been historically and conceptually excluded from the public realm, and marked as 'other' even upon inclusion, political participation entails varying degrees of 'ontological complicity', including acquiescing in the power hierarchies within which they are located," Roy describes (2014, 183-4). She raises the question of what is at stake in "attaining 'composure' through normative (political) identities", which is precisely what Njeri defies. Njeri seeks sexual agency *via* first demanding political visibility, which she does by physically joining the guerrillas in the forest. It is also significant that her choosing combat, as opposed to the traditional female roles recounted by the elders of the resistance — carrying food, messages and weapons — signals away from an availability for childbearing. As "female identities and anatomies became symbolically bound to motherhood and to the nation — at the expense of female political agency and female sexual agency" (Nicholls 101) in the novel, it is significant that Njeri is the only female character of childbearing age whose reproductive capacities are never mentioned. Njeri presents an opportunity for the novel to pursue the full complexity of gender vis-a-vis radical politics, and what ways — other than requiring the "ontological complicity" (Roy 183) of women — this relationship could inform the coming-into-being of the nation. But the narrative hurries over this markedly "other" woman.

A similar ambiguity exists in *Home and the World*, where Bimala's initial interest in Swadeshi is entangled with her romantic feelings for Sandip. However, Ray's adapted screenplay and his formal cinematic elements also illustrate autonomous shifts in Bimala's political consciousness; they exist in a complex — and indeed, thus realistic — amalgam with her tenderness for Nikhil and her excitement at extra-marital flirtation. Certain scenes demonstrate how Bimala's conversations with her husband and her charged moments alone with Sandip become opportunities for her to test her burgeoning political views, as well as to adjust them as and when the two men reveal new

information about the outside world. For instance, in a domestic dinner scene, Bimala asks Nikhil, “All of Bengal has taken up the Swadeshi cause. Why don’t you?” speaking in collective identity terms to challenge her husband. Nikhil replies that he cannot as a *zamindar* be irresponsible with his views on Swadeshi and risk depriving the poorest. Ray resorts to his signature close-ups of the female lead to allow us to witness Bimala absorbing the class dynamics Nikhil points out. Her next question utilises this new information to get to the heart of the problem at hand – one of anti-colonial strategy – thus demonstrating a greater degree of political consciousness than her initial provocation. “Can we follow Swadeshi without making the poor suffer?” She asks. Is there an anti-colonial strategy that does not demand the most from those who have the least?

The question Bimala arrives at through a mix of emotional and intellectual means is a historically situated one. It raises the question of political vanguardism: a major debate in anti-colonial liberation thought. Many proposed vanguardism, because nationalism and national liberation were held in many ways ideologically incompatible — or at least their timetables for realisation, quite distinct — by radical anti-colonialists, “[who] tended to view the attainment of nationhood in light of the seizure of colonial state power, a seizure to be followed, in their plan, by a wholesale reconstruction of society in the postcolonial era” (Lazarus 1990, 5). In fact, scenes like the above – where Bimala’s growing consciousness shows she is changing in ways her love interests cannot understand outside of gendered parameters that assume she remains to be “convinced” by one or the other – unsettle Nikhil and Sandip’s self-styled identities as anti-colonial nationalists.

Female matriarchs, too, prove similarly difficult for *Wheat* to situate within its conception of the relationship between individual subjectivities and collective histories. Wambui is one such figure, who has a real counterpart in Kenyan history: Wambui Wagarama (Radithalo 2001, 3). Her story is recollected in the novel as one of the many heroic instances of anti-colonial resistance. But the consequences of configuring nation-building through Gĩkũyũ male potency is the erasure of the resources that Wambui and

the matrilineal tradition of resistance she represents offers for decolonisation. We learn that Wambui “carried secrets from the villages to the forest and back to the villages and towns” (Ngũgĩ 14). A wide range of organisational and logistical responsibilities were entrusted to her: she “knew the underground movements in Nakuru, Njoro, Elburgon and other places in and around the Rift Valley”, but prefers to “smile enigmatically” when pressed for details. We as readers therefore know little of her motivations or her political convictions, even though she is held up as the (male-designated) example of nationalist womanhood. To be so, in addition to “enigmatically” silent, she must be de-sexed: “Wambui was not very old, though she had lost most of her teeth” and she had dressed like “the picture of decrepitude and senile decay” to assist the Mau Mau (14). Her post-fertile age renders her class of primary and her gender of secondary importance for a narrative so invested in reproduction, but this still means that women like Wambui’s political subjectivities, and the communal legacies of their actions, are left under-explored.

In another situation of contradiction and complexity that by now characterises the treatment of women’s subjectivities in this novel, Wambui’s resistance knowledges remain outside its interest, despite the fact that *Wheat* otherwise strongly accords value to collective histories as both resources for individual psychic healing and national decolonisation. It has a rich such history to draw from here; from 1954 to 1960, the British detained approximately 8000 Mau Mau women under the Emergency.²⁷ But the history of women’s resistance and detention have not been investigated in detail, especially in the latter years of the Emergency period, and much more is known about the men, who have been lionised in this history. However, Mau Mau also represented the apex of Gĩkũyũ women’s political involvement in the colonial period, with recent scholarship (Bruce-Lockhart 2014) establishing that women’s detention and punishment were similar to that of their male counterparts.

²⁷ This was confirmed in the Hanslope Park files, which numbered over 1500 and were uncovered in 2011 by historians working on the London High Court case between the British FCO and Kenyan plaintiffs who were held in detention camps during the Emergency period.

V

The reification or reduction to symbols of a complex set of female characters' subjectivities when it suits the anti-colonial politics of the narrative conceptually weakens the dialectical process that *Wheat* suggests is key for decolonisation. This process, rooted in a people's history of political consciousness and resistance, is located throughout in the novel's "full spectrum of heroes, traitors, oppressed and oppressors, particularly those who do not fit into any such easily defined categories" (Harlow 1985, 244). None are flawed because there is some ahistorical suggestion of "human nature" at work, but for reasons material, psychic and political. Mugo, for instance, is burdened with guilt over his betrayal of Kihika, whilst all of Thabai interprets his reclusiveness as an understandable outcome of trauma. Yet with Mugo's confession of guilt comes a consciousness not unlike that theorised by Fanon as disalienation: "As soon as the first words were out, Mugo felt light. So he was responsible for whatever he had done in the past, for whatever he would do in the future. The consciousness frightened him" (231). Mugo's reclusiveness constitutes him as an object of communal desire, drawing to him characters who feel similarly isolated by the burdens of their past. Kihika tells him, "I have always wanted to speak to you" (185); Mumbi says, "I wanted to see you, and I would have come to you" (132). Ngũgĩ has shown via both historicising the inner turmoil of these characters, and through Emergency-era flashbacks, that the psychic malaise each thinks is theirs alone is common. This malaise cannot be attributed to their individual subjectivities, for it is a product of material conditions. As the drunken and pitiable Githua says, "The government has forgotten us. We fought for freedom. And yet now!" (126) Peasants who had expected independence to restore land to them were sorely disappointed. Meanwhile, "those who emerged to rule in 1963 were in many cases those who had betrayed the freedom fighters, a group of nascent grabbers and looters" (Ogot 2003, 9). The conditions defining intersubjective relations in *Wheat* are at root economic conditions; however, they are conditions which characters in the novel, experiencing as they are its individual psychic consequences, do not always know as shared oppression.

Ngũgĩ thus builds a dialectic that incorporates subjectivity as an accumulation of the material and the historic. However, as I have traced above, this is mediated through gender in a way that forsakes women of the same processes whereby which *Wheat's* male protagonists Mugo's and Gikonyo's respective acts of atonement facilitate their disalienation and return to community. The latter two regain their sense of self through a difficult, but redemptive, growth towards a re-configuration of their subjectivities (and masculinities). There is room here for interpretations like Andrew Hammond's, who argues the novel proposes that the emerging postcolonial state must necessarily reject masculinist ideology for a more egalitarian gender politics, and does so by problematising the assumption of a single, logical, and unquestionable idea of what is masculine (2011, 118). This problematisation itself, however, relies on assuming a particular bond between the emerg(ing/ed) nation and Gĩkũyũ men's subjectivities. Ngũgĩ maps the "split, contingent psyche of masculinist selfhood" (Hammond 118), itself thus fractured because of colonialism's emasculating structures, onto the nation itself. He assumes the fractured state of Gĩkũyũ masculinity *is* the fractured people as a whole. The novel's problematisation of a single idea of what a man is or can be is an important critical pursuit both in *Wheat* and several of its contemporaries like Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964). But in centring the re-socialisation of Gĩkũyũ men in the total work of decolonisation, the novel condenses the latter complex task into two processes: one, the reassurance of male subjectivities via psychic healing provided by women, and secondly – in demonstrating how women have important roles in reproducing the "correct" (not emasculating) kind of independence – the emergence of a "new" kind of Gĩkũyũ masculinity (virile and dominant, but now able to process emotions).

Women's subjectivities are thus imagined only insofar as they make this masculinity/nationhood possible (as with Mumbi and Wambui); when their motivations and the consciousness from which these arise exist in "excess" (as do Njeri's and Wangari's), the narrative pursues them no further. In *Home and the World*, a similar discourse, whereby which the whole cultural edifice of the nation comes to rest in the home (symbolised in the physical person of the sequestered and observant Hindu

woman), is propagated by both Sandip's reification of Bimala as Mother India and by Nikhil's paternalistic humanism. As we shall see, however, Bimala's overall characterisation and the film's formal choices sometimes challenge this.

VI

First published in book form in 1919 and translated into English (with the close input of its author) as *Home and the World*, Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* is a story where home and world — their contradictions and their similarities — intersect at the point of gender during a time of Indian anti-colonial nationalism. To the backdrop of the Second Swadeshi Movement that was fuelled by the 1905 partition of Bengal, the novel follows Bimala Choudhury (Swatilekha Sengupta), a young woman who emerges from confinement at the urging of her Western-educated landowning husband. He, Nikhil Choudhury (Victor Banerjee), has invited his boyhood friend Sandip (Soumitra Chatterjee), a Swadeshi leader, to stay with them on their estate in Sukhsayar. Sandip and Bimala's meeting sets in motion the dissolution of "home" as well as tragedy in the "world" outside as Sandip organises acts of sabotage to stop the sale of foreign goods in Sukhsayar, while Bimala grows attracted to both him and Swadeshi ideology. Sandip's machinations lead to violence between Hindus and Muslims, and Tagore concludes with an ambiguous ending where husband and wife are reconciled but Nikhil is grievously injured.

The celebrated Bengali director Satyajit Ray's 1984 film adaption sustains the contours of Tagore's critique, but foregrounds the story's connections between Indian (bourgeois and middle class) nationalism; gender; and colonial capital. The film, which was begun by Ray but completed by his son due to ill health, triangulates these structural forces firstly via narrative moments where Nikhil and Sandip are frequently blind to how gender and capitalism operate — how, in other words, nationalism and capitalism are and always have been in the "home", too. Further, the film suggests that the invisible long-term structures of gendering that Swadeshi nationalism fails to

transform are not so solely because of that same nationalism's investment in patriarchy, but also because it remains invested in the colonial economy, whilst resenting Britain's control over it. This is done through the reveal around Sandip, whose nationalism is exposed (largely in interaction with Bimala, but also with his young protégé Amulya) as class envy. This is not necessarily because his ideology represents the "bad" kind of nationalism, but because his is no ideology at all: Sandip mistakes his feelings of class entitlement as a *bhadralok* man – an entitlement that British colonial rule frustrates – for anti-colonial consciousness. Meanwhile Nikhil, the benign *zamindar* who believes in Indian self-rule but rejects Swadeshi nationalism for its damaging tactics, still wishes to see nationalist consciousness produce a New Indian Woman: one transformed from ignorance and illiteracy into the new *bhadramahila*, an educated and loyal helpmate for the modern Indian man. His position is reminiscent of those of Bengali reformers like Radhakanta Deb and Rammohan Roy; a stance that Simonetta Casci (with perhaps a broad brush but nonetheless applicably) argues "leant on basic assumptions that mixed Western values and Vedic myths... [So] for Indian women there was no escape from the oppressive patriarchal system" (1999, 278). In the late nineteenth century, upper-class Bengali men looked back to a notion of a "golden age" of women rooted in the Hindu Vedic tradition (Quigley 2018, 55), with influential writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee becoming vocal proponents of many of the female archetypes queried in several Ray films (especially his 1964 *Charulata*). We can see an attempt at the deification of Bimala in *Home and the World*, too, as part of what Lakshmi Quigley dubs "[Bengali] cultural nationalism's gendered project" at the turn of the twentieth century. But we as viewers are invited to reflect critically on this deification through Ray's direction, on which more later.

The aforementioned triangulation (anti-colonial nationalisms, capitalism and patriarchy) is revealed, though not resolved, through Bimala's burgeoning political consciousness as it begins to "show up" the class and gender inflections to Nikhil's and Sandip's nationalisms. I read Ray's cinematic form throughout not as a narratively disconnected (non-diegetic) personal aesthetics, but always taking its cue from those emotional registers, dialogues and materials on-screen (the diegetic). As such, I will

attend to Ray's characterisation of Bimala as relying both on narrative choices that foreground shifts in her consciousness, and on formal choices like framing, lighting, colour and shot type that invite the viewer to discern the emotive charge and internal contradictions that new developments in her storyline generate. Her political consciousness beginning to transform through her new emotional and intellectual knowledges, she ends up with certain epistemic privileges that expose the contradictions in the two men's ideologies, and pays the price patriarchy extracts.

VII

An early scene introduces Bimala as intelligent and headstrong, with a degree of political awareness that exceeds her husband Nikhil's expectations. When Bimala correctly answers him about what Swadeshi is, Nikhil exclaims, "you know so much!" in surprise. Bimala responds with, "I read the newspaper".²⁸ Her confinement exists to a degree in Nikhil's mind, where he fails to assume that the newspaper that informs him of the world — a particularly "national" form of media, in Benedict Anderson's argument (1983) — has also informed Bimala's understanding of her present. When Nikhil grows excited and demands she tell him more of what she knows, Bimala responds: "You seem to forget that your wife is educated. I speak English, why wouldn't I know these things?" This exchange tells us Bimala is conscious of the colonial value systems that operate in aristocratic Bengali households like theirs. In equating speaking English with being educated, she responds in the register of what she knows to be cultural currency for her husband and their class.

This exchange and its evidence of Bimala's existing awareness of an "outside" is augmented by Ray's formal choices, with framing techniques and *mise-en-scène* key to his communicating the emotive and narrative undercurrents of dialogue scenes like these. Setting is rarely if ever merely indicative of where or who characters are, but also

²⁸ All subsequent quotes from "Home and the World", *Criterion Collection: Eclipse Series 40 - Late Ray* [DVD], 2014.

of “structures of feeling” in Raymond Williams’ sense (1978)²⁹ — of what Ray’s characters are preoccupied with, what social forces are presently at work, and what “affective elements of consciousness and relationships” (Sharma and Tygstrup 5) are manifest in the scene. Here, Ray favours single light sources on faces; his framing is tight, allowing for focus on the unspoken undercurrents found in facial expression and gesture; and dialogue is layered, as brought to life by actor Swatileka Sengupta’s complex tonal delivery – teasing yet barbed. Meanwhile, the materiality of this scene functions with as much depth. Bimala is seen trying on the various clothes she herself has designed and just received: an array of cotton Edwardian blouses and silk saris. An abundance of textiles lie draped on furniture as Bimala explains to Nikhil that Swadeshi demands the boycott of Manchester cotton. Ray’s camera then shoots in close-up the myriad objects in the room as Nikhil points out, one by one, that Bimala’s comb, mirror, perfumes, dressing table, and four-poster bed are all imported. Their participation in the conditions they are discussing in theory is amply evident.

Although the First Swadeshi Movement (1850 to 1904) and the Second (1905 to 1917, during which this story takes place) both aimed to put pressure on the British primarily via the boycott of Manchester cotton, historians have pointed out there was little alternative: Indian textile markets only expanded sufficiently to meet domestic demands after the 1930’s (McGowan 2016, 519). This scene hints with historical accuracy at a certain misalignment between the economic reality of rural India of the time, and the strategy encouraged by Swadeshi’s middle- and upper-class proponents. Yet as Bimala sees her material surroundings anew in light of this information, she does not ask whether Swadeshi endangers them: she asks, “then what *should* we do?” She almost immediately understands that she, “inside”, is already implicated in the anti-colonial political momentum “outside”. The numerous mirrors in this scene amplify these interpersonal and subjective undercurrents, multiplying the already excessive

²⁹ These structures’ true social contents “cannot without loss be reduced to belief systems, institutions or explicit general relationships, though it may include all these as lived and experienced” (Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 1977. 133). Ray’s recourse to cinematic form is so: socially-driven, and therefore often revealing of certain “belief systems, institutions or relationships” at work in a scene, but only as these are “lived and experienced” by his characters.

amount of imported luxuries as well as indicating a moment where she sees herself, in her everyday surroundings, at a new remove.

Bimala then agrees to venture into the semi-public space of the sitting room to meet Nikhil's childhood friend. Sandip, a leader within the Swadeshi movement, is on something of a campaign trail, delivering speeches to galvanise peasants into nationalist feeling. We already know Bimala has some sense of the difference between false and authentic political consciousness; prior to this meeting, when Nikhil had asked what Bimala made of Sandip after his Swadeshi speech, her response was: "I'm sure he'll be shocked if I wear one of my fancy dresses". Her sarcastic answer suggests she already suspects that a man like Sandip enjoys performing how he lives by his own politics, as much as doing politics. Their meeting confirms her guess, but also introduces multiple social undercurrents and emotional registers that set the love triangle of the story in motion. Ray's cinematography again establishes much of this through a signature interplay of both form and narrative.

The significance of props and set design returns to the fore, with material objects in the scene indicating a variety of things about the characters, their class, the colonial economy and gender dynamics. The heavy Edwardian drapes, the patterned silk of the couches, the men's *dhotis* and *kurtas*, as well as Bimala's fiery red sari all saturate the frame with textiles, visually overwhelming the viewer to the point of distraction. The non-clothing textiles function in ways that feminise this scene of political discussion, yet they also have an un-lived-in, decorative appearance, which reminds us that gendered cultural norms dictate the usage of the space. This overwhelming *mise-en-scène* crowds the theoretical discussion on ideology taking place, illustrating not only the characters' class separation from the subject of their conversation, but also the evolution of Indian bourgeois tastes. Abigail McGowan describes how, for this class at this particular period of time, "non-clothing textiles helped to negotiate the novel conditions of urban life, where people moved regularly, homes were increasingly open to non-kin visitors, men and women shared space in new ways, and elite women were aesthetic arbiters of domestic space" (2016, 518). Ray sets this crucial meeting in surroundings where

material indicators of English tastes, and therefore colonial capital, have reached a degree of familiarity from use and now exist in a “homegrown” register: Bimala adorns the English silver vases with local flora daily, and Nikhil serves his guests Darjeeling tea in Derby porcelain.

These material surroundings – with their especial emphasis on textiles – are utilised actively for self-fashioning, too. We see this in Bimala designing her own Edwardian blouses, but a scene where Nikhil surveys his lands on a white horse, dressed like a British colonial officer, is perhaps the most unmistakable example of how this material self-fashioning exists in tension with the political commitments expressed in the previous sitting-room scene. It is significant that the only time we see Nikhil out of his traditional *kurta* is this rare moment where the otherwise cerebral man physically performs his class authority.



Fig. 1: Nikhil surveys his tenant farmers (Dir. Satyajit Ray, 1984)

Ray’s low-angle medium shot (the perspective of someone on foot looking up at someone on horseback), combined with Nikhil’s linen suit and pith helmet, means the audience see him as his poor Muslim tenants do when he pauses to hear their imam’s sermon (*Fig. 1*). The symbolisms of such framing and costume speak to how colonial capital took many forms. It changed but not entirely destroyed the feudal relations it found in India, remoulding native economies and re-configuring the sartorial and decorative symbols associated with power, as with the colonial pith helmet. Indeed, to Nikhil’s Muslim tenants, their *zamindar* looks much like an English *sahib*, and the two

forms of authority, colonial and feudal, become connected. As empathetically as the story portrays Nikhil, the materials of a life built upon the colonial-capitalist exploitation of the Indian peasantry shapes his subjectivity. The objects that decorate him into who he is exist because colonialism exists.

This relation between the materiality of colonial capital and subjectivity is also established via the film's challenge to the home-world binary. The porosity of both is a crucial factor in enabling Bimala's growing political consciousness. Firstly, *Home and the World* neither holds the two spaces to be separate, nor stable in themselves. Materials with significance for the colonial economy inform the characters' actions, organises their movements through space, and even indicates their thoughts. Bimala interacts with objects in her sitting room almost incessantly throughout her one-on-one meetings with Sandip, often touching things remarkably related to the topic or undercurrent of their conversation.



Fig. 2: The material everyday of the colonial economy (Dir. Satyajit Ray, 1984)

Dedicated close-ups of particular props implicate the characters, Bimala included, within the multi-directional flows of colonial capital in their lives – as oppressed colonial subjects from an oppressive class and caste (*Fig. 2*). Gold sovereigns (what looks like the 1873 Victoria Young Head) receives two close-ups: a furtive one in Bimala's nervous hands as she secretly takes the money for Swadeshi, and a hypnotically long one in Sandip's covetous ones. Coin facilitates a pivotal moment towards Bimala's disillusionment with Sandip, as she looks at him with a newfound

caution when he visibly exults at the touch of gold. Supriya Chaudhuri sees “the film’s visual excess [as] a stylisation of Bimala’s own self-obsession with her self-image” (2013, 94); however, *Home and the World’s* “visual excess” is no mere symbol of Bimala grappling with ego-formation. Rather, the materials of the home show that Sandip and Nikhil’s various ways of making sense of Bimala’s (to them, sudden) presence in “their” world is unfounded. In being populated by these objects, Ray renders the home as an always-already historicised, “worlded” space, in the sense of colonial capital’s penetration.

The visual emphasis on this interrelatedness through prop and setting also makes it difficult to take “home” and “world” themselves as fixed entities. This remains a point of contention in several discussions of Indian anti-colonial nationalisms. Despite acknowledging their mutual constructedness, Partha Chatterjee (1993) genders space as home/feminine and world/masculine in order to discuss the problem of anti-colonial nationalism (namely, how to resolve its being a derivative discourse). As Priyamvada Gopal remarks, such siloing works in favour of “the assumption that ‘the nationalist mind’ was always already male and that the issue of national ‘self-identity’ was fundamentally a crisis of masculinity” (2012, 61). Genderings of space insupportably suggest women existed outside the economic life of India under colonialism, and therefore cannot have any claims to a political consciousness that could foster a “nationalist mind” — which, presumably, requires the epistemological privilege of experiencing the injustices of colonialism “outside”. Ashis Nandy rejects this separation in his reading, in which he offers that Bimala is “the link between the two forms of patriotism the men represent” and “her personality incorporates the contesting selves of the two protagonists” (1994, 14). This begins to suggest the intersectional nature of home and world (and of Bimala’s subjectivity as informed by both, conscious of its intersections in a way the two men are not). However, Nandy’s reading of Bimala as an embodied amalgam or link between male patriotisms does not entirely break with the gendering of the “nationalist mind”, even though it positions female subjectivities as squarely within and shaped by the “world”. Indra Mitra likewise calls the stability of the woman-in-the-home symbol into question, but she too argues the symbolic ordering of

social space into the ‘home’ and the ‘world’ is at the very heart of Tagore's novel (1995, 248).

This charged discussion, I would suggest, is also one about the location of the development of political consciousness, and why a woman’s subjectivity must be managed and contained by separating the two environments (private and public) of one colonial-capitalist reality. *Home and the World’s* answer to this is that because Bimala’s political consciousness develops through experiencing the materiality of her surroundings differently (given new knowledge), it reveals the false consciousness of the two male patriotisms on display. Her interactions with Sandip and Nikhil frequently expose how they contradict their own ideologies’ *raison d’êtres* before risking patriarchy. For example, when Sandip flatters and cajoles Bimala towards the cause, he re-figures her as the living symbol and recipient of the Swadeshi mantra *Vande Mātaram*. While moved by nationalist feeling, Bimala is able to separate this emotion from Sandip’s performative nationalism: Ray’s cinematography, script and Sengupta’s performance work together to imply this in their first meeting. The scene involves Sandip singing a nationalist song and close-ups of Bimala listening. The Swadeshi poem, which is both uplifting and collectivist in its assurance that India’s destiny is freedom, is affectively charged for Bimala.



Fig. 3: Swadeshi song (Dir. Satyajit Ray, 1984)

The camera's tight close-up emphasises a degree of internalisation is taking place (*Fig. 3*); ideology put to art has the rhetorical power to (re)inform people’s perceptions of

themselves and their world. Sandip, in this moment in the film, is an artist creating an affect. Ray then jolts both Bimala and the audience out of this trance with the arrival of servants carrying tea and refreshments on English porcelain. The scene suddenly switches into a very different register. “I haven’t gotten over my weakness for sweets yet,” Sandip confesses boyishly, while Nikhil adds, “nor your weakness for foreign cigarettes, I see”. The fervour in his song, followed immediately by a return to bourgeois material comforts, now rings of Fanon’s assessment of the colonised intellectual who undertakes works of art

“in a style that is meant to be national but which is strangely reminiscent of exoticism. The colonized intellectual who returns to his people through works of art behaves in fact like a foreigner [...] the ideas he expresses, the preoccupations that haunt him are in no way related to the daily lot of the woman and men of his country” (Fanon 1961, 160).

It is Bimala’s interruption that cements this divide, rendering Sandip momentarily speechless: “Can’t you give [smoking] up? Don’t you have the willpower?” she asks. Beyond the affect Sandip’s song has created, she also sees confirmation of his performative nationalism. Chuckling with discomfort, Sandip covers his moment of exposure by offering to give up smoking in exchange for Bimala joining the movement. The juxtaposition undermines Sandip’s revolutionary credentials with the material evidence of his class position, revealing the contingent nature of his politics.

VIII

This early reveal indicates, I would argue, that Sandip’s falsehood itself is not the film’s key concern. The subsequent series of solo meetings between Bimala and Sandip are cinematically weighted in a way that instead highlights the film’s aforementioned interest in Bimala’s transformation in consciousness. Whilst Tagore is primarily interested in exposing Sandip’s “bad” nationalism and comparing it to Nikhil’s “good” nationalism, Ray’s adaptation confirms Sandip’s opportunism early, and devotes more scenes to unpicking both men’s thwarted expectations of encountering

either a politically blank or a purely intuitive female subjectivity in Bimala. This is not as apparent in Tagore's original, which is perhaps in keeping with what Kumari Jayawardena (2016) writes of Tagore's attitude to women's liberation, which aligned with most male Bengali reformers of his time. He "came out strongly against some customs and practices" but he did not apply this historicism to women's subjectivities, believing there to be "some special female qualities imperative for social harmony" (Jayawardena 85). Ray chooses to make visible – although passes no final judgement on, as is his style – both the dichotomy Sandip is trying to construct between Man/ thought and Woman/feeling, and Nikhil's slightly patronising enthusiasm for "cultivating" Bimala's mind. In both symbolisations, the future of the nation requires that the capacities of its women are optimised and available for nation-building.

For Nikhil, this means creating modern citizens out of Indian women, who can be educated aids to their husbands (if bourgeois) or labour to industrialise India (if worker or peasant). For Sandip, this means providing reproductive labour; socialising and guiding Bengali men through their emotional labour; and embodying some spiritual essence that is Bengal. As in Radithalo's (2001) aforementioned interpretation of the reification of Ngūgĩ's female protagonist Mumbi (which applies a cultural feminist lens to argue such symbolisations are empowering ones), Indrani Mitra (1995) suggests Sandip's framing of Bimala in terms of Kali the Divine Mother is empowering. However, his form of nationalism relies on the notion that women "intuit" nation-love, as their reproductive capacities apparently anchor them to the bodily realm. There is no subversiveness in Sandip's Woman-worship, but rather the belief that women exist in some kind of idyllic state prior to intellectual faculties. Men, in contrast, have traded the former for the latter, and thus for Sandip are burdened with questions, doubts, politics, and principles. Through the distance between Sandip's assumptions about Bimala's subjectivity and what Ray has shown us of the latter thus far, a reading that sees subversion in Bimala's goddessification does not problematise that Sandip's bourgeois nationalism still conceives of men as the thinking producers, and women the embodied reproducers, of nation.

In fact, in attributing Bimala's nationalist feeling to her living solely in the sensual day-to-day, Sandip's ahistorical assumption that women live purely sensory lives throws his own ideology into question. What are *his* motives, if *his* nationalist feeling does not arise from a place of embodied experience, as he so performatively celebrates Bimala's does? Engels' description of a man who subscribes to ideology without political consciousness maps well onto Sandip: "The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives. Because it is a process of thought, he derives both its form and its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors" (1968, n.p.). Sandip's gender, his *bhadralok* social and economic privileges, and even his "modernising" zeal align with an Indian middle-class historical self-consciousness. In Anirudh Deshpande's observation, the "national project of this middle-class was made problematic by the colonial conditions confronting it" (2009, xi), but also by the colonial value systems through which they viewed this project. This is particularly discernible in the terms in which Sandip defends their movement's song: "Don't you remember the significance of *La Marseillaise* in the French Revolution?" he asks Nikhil reproachfully. Liberal capitalist interpretations of the Enlightenment as a vehicle for progress and development are integral to Sandip's understanding of class, with which he is more familiar than the conditions of labour or functionings of capital in his home of colonial Bengal. He sees the British foremost as a hindrance to the full capitalist development of the Indian bourgeois and middle classes. It is through encountering Bimala and failing to circumscribe her subjectivity within parameters that would reassure his own gender and class privileges that Sandip's "real motives, unknown to him" (Engels 1968) become known to us.

Much scholarship on both Ray's and Tagore's versions of *Home and the World* agree on Nikhil's "good" nationalism, stressing its humanist inflections (Peacock 2011; Sengupta 2012). Yet as we witness Bimala beginning to situate her subjectivity in terms wider than the domestic and familial, Ray's adaptation frequently and subtly demonstrates that Nikhil's nationalist consciousness is contingent upon his own gender- and class-based assumptions, which are both different and similar to Sandip's. As Sumit

Sarkar notes, in Bengal, “the link with a semi-feudal land system did not prevent bourgeois aspirations, but it did inhibit radical thought and action on agrarian issues – a limitation of ultimately momentous consequence for Bengal, with its large Muslim peasant population” (2000, 254).

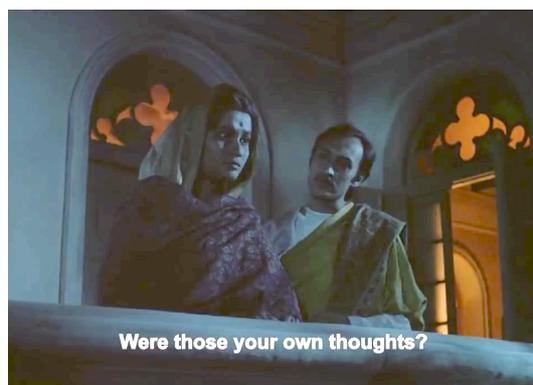


Fig. 4: Nikhil suspects Sandip's influence (Dir. Satyajit Ray, 1984)

Indeed, in a scene located in the symbolic space of a balcony (*Fig. 4*), where the film's colour scheme is striking in its meaningful duality of warm and cool in tones (Bimala stepping away from the home fires and out to the world), this reformist and self-preserving politics is embodied by the humanist Nikhil. Asking, “those things you said tonight: were those your own thoughts?” he reveals he is troubled by Bimala earlier questioning him about his lack of action. It is an important question in both the political context of its Tagorean source material, and the film's own. Ray's *Home and the World* premiered at Cannes Film Festival a month before Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian army to enter the Golden Temple Complex in Amritsar in June 1984. The innocent exchange belies a broader issue: whose actions stem from a place of anti-colonial consciousness, and who has been influenced by or manipulated into the ideology of the day?

Nikhil's question undeniably also genders political consciousness, with the anxiety he expresses aligning with his desire for the selective modernisation of Indian women. This is erased in interpretations that, for example, read Nikhil as representative of Tagore's politics vis-a-vis Mahatma Gandhi's (Canby 1985). In fact, in Nikhil's

continued use of the idioms of (patriarchal) Western modernity, “one can also see the reinvention of Europe, the center of the world, to which, in Hegelian fashion, all history is fated to return” (Lal 2002, 12). That return for the “modernised” Indian woman can only be back to her “absolutely modern” (Tagore 1919, n.p.) husband. Tanika Sarkar’s observation that, when the essential values of society came to be located on the “chaste and virtuous” woman, the actual doors of the *zenana* could be unlocked, must be emphasised here. Upper- and middle-class patriarchal control of Indian female sexuality “changed from what was seen as the coercive system of the *zenana* to the more contractual form of companionate marriage”, which would still reassure patriarchy (2000, 55). The relationship between coloniality and gender, Maria Lugones reminds us (2008), can be understood by expanding upon Aníbal Quijano’s idea of the “coloniality of power” (2000, 342) in a way that is attentive to how the narrowing of the concept of gender to the scope of the gender system of Eurocentered global capitalism was a key component of the securing of coloniality. This narrowing or reduction of gender “to the private, to control over sex and its resources and products, is a matter of ideology” (Lugones 2008, 12) in itself. In this modern/colonial gender system, “women racialised as inferior were turned from animals into various modified versions of ‘women’ as it fit the processes of Eurocentered global capitalism” (13). This may not recall *Home and the World’s* central couple at a surface level, but as the above scene illustrates, the “modified version of ‘woman’” (Lugones 13) that Bimala is now being called upon to be, in order to fit the particular processes of colonial capitalism in 1910s Bengal, speaks of the needs of that global capitalism from her at that moment in time. Nikhil’s reformism, in this sense, is this modern/colonial gender system at work. Despite urging Bimala out of the *zenana* in his desire to see her choose him of her own free will, Nikhil nevertheless holds Sandip as the sole explanation for Bimala’s growing political consciousness. If the now “free” Bimala is not arriving at the same political views as him, this must be due to his rival’s skill, rather than his wife’s own experiences of their shared material reality.

This resurfaces what I have traced in my above discussion of Ngũgĩ’s *Wheat*: a difficulty in conceiving of women’s subjectivities as shaped by the historic and material

conditions they share with men, with the addition of the epistemic particularities of their own experiences of these conditions. Whereas *Wheat* struggles with this at quite a fundamental level (and requires reading into and through its cast of idealised women), Ray's film locates this difficulty via an astute characterisation of Nikhil, thereby pointing it out to his audience more clearly. Sandip's imaginary realm of pure "feminine intuition" may be entirely unable to conceive of the possibility that women's subjectivities are as diverse as the experiences available in the material world they share with men. But conceiving of them as a blank slate awaiting the liberal man's pedagogy, as does Nikhil, is shown to be similarly ahistorical.

IX

In the rising action of the film, under false assurances that his methods are non-violent, Bimala procures Sandip five thousand rupees for the Swadeshi cause. We have seen how the symbolic role that Sandip has constructed for Bimala reveals his own investedness in colonial and patriarchal economies; now, Bimala begins to see Sandip's contradictions through the framework of her own emerging political consciousness. Amulya is an important character in accelerating this. A promising youth derailed from his education, he is one of the generation who, in Sandip's vision, will put "the Swadeshi flame" to building the nation that has been won. Before Amulya reveals to Bimala that Sandip asked for more money than the cause needed (and spent them on first class travel and imported luxuries) Ray has already suggested Amulya's conscience cannot reconcile with his mentor's actions. Similar framing methods — tight close-ups and shot-reverse-shots, used in the aforementioned living room scene — gesture at this during a sequence where Sandip pays off Nikhil's estate manager to provoke communal violence. Ray cuts from their discussion to close-ups of Amulya's face; twice the camera invites us to note him furtively looking at the speakers then quickly away, attempting to contain what reads like confusion and distress. Seeing his discomfort, we are encouraged to see the idealistic Amulya's subjectivity in more complex terms than Sandip does.

Honest, if naïve, Amulya is finally deterred from his role of *provocateur* by Bimala in a climactic scene where she attempts to both save Amulya from himself and to rectify her own mistake in lending Sandip money. Only Sudeshna Chakravarti seems to have noticed that “it is this horror story in the mouth of an innocent boy which finally convince[s] Bimala of the evil of Sandip” (2013, 162): most scholars fixate on Sandip’s ideological extremism as the main reveal of the scene (Nandy 1994, 19). As Chakravarti’s emphasis suggests, Bimala actually sets aside the revelation about Sandip in this scene, and is more effected by the urgency of dissuading Amulya from armed robbery. This scene is about the Amulyas grappling with a moral universalism that cannot — and should not, Ray’s framing suggests — be entirely silenced in service of a hypothetical future good, especially when the nature of that good is decided by men from a class with little skin in the game. The climax poses the question of whether an ideology that cannot reconcile with the conscience of even a loyal follower can have any future beyond continuous coercion. It is also about the protagonist, whose political consciousness, at this point, is able to hold contradictions while still recognising a certain universal (here, the moral wrong of the violence to be disproportionately suffered by the Amulyas being directed by the Sandips). Her subjectivity had already been *of* the “world” even while it was circumscribed by the “home”; the “world” has now again re-informed her consciousness.

We should be cautious about constructing a false opposition between materiality and subjectivity here, as Keya Ganguly seems to when she observes that in *Home and the World* “the self in relation to other commodities” lacks “the roundedness of real historical personalities” (50). Although Bimala is indeed “a construct for the abstraction of reification” (Ganguly 42) for the two men, as my above readings have sought to show, the adaptation also undercuts these abstractions (*Bhārat Mata* or the modernised *bhadramahila* respectively for Sandip and Nikhil). Bimala’s choices have political impact: Sandip loses his lackey, Amulya, and fails to finance further provocation in Sukhsayar. This character progression resonates both with Fanon’s words on how “the past ‘takes’ in [the] individual” whilst being inflected by one’s own “decisions” (1952,

56) and with a post-positivist viewpoint like that of Satya P. Mohanty's, demonstrating that "to say that experiences and identities are constructed is not to prejudge the question of their epistemic status" (1997, 205). Bimala's lived experiences throughout the film – both material and emotional – have epistemological privileges that yield knowledge in a mediated way of how ideology functions. In this case, it is knowledge of how nationalisms can and do remain invested in patriarchy and capital even if they seem to be calling for a re-arrangement of power relations.

In light of this, the film's tragic finale seems to contradict its own project. But in its dark resolution, the full substance of its critique is also visible. Bimala herself utters it when Nikhil tells her he must leave to intervene in the riot: "I knew it. I knew I'd be punished". Punishment awaits a woman who has not moved through the "home" and the "world" embodying the symbols she should have, and certainly if she has begun to demystify their false demarcations.³⁰ The final shots are Nikhil's body being carried home, and a grief-numbed Bimala wearing widow's whites. Considering her character arc, the ending of the film seems a shock and a digression; it differs from Tagore's ambiguous ending, in which Nikhil returns wounded but alive. As this is Ray's single most significant departure from his original source material, the narrative choice cannot be read outside of the critique that has been building throughout *Home and the World*. Interpreting the ending as catharsis for dramatic effect, as Jayita Sengupta proposes (2012, 4), sits uneasy with Ray's aesthetics, where cinematography is never in excess of character motivations and plot developments. We must approach Ray's ending as part of the critique consistent throughout the diegesis: as soon as a female subject grows in political consciousness, she must be put to social death. Had Bimala emerged as a political agent *within* the ontological confines designated for her by Nikhil and Sandip (the Western-educated yet traditional woman for the former, *Bharat Mata* for the latter) she would also be acquiescing to the power hierarchies within which they are located, ignoring the contradictions that have informed her consciousness throughout the story.

³⁰ I use the term in the Marxian sense of the erasure of the relations of domination and exploitation on which capitalism depends.

X

A Grain of Wheat and *Home and the World* thus reveal how Gikūyū anti-colonial nationalism and Swadeshi nationalism respectively fail to conceive of women's subjectivities as formed by historical-material experiences, as well as the sexual-emotional experiences that patriarchy already assumes. This problem of situating female subjectivities as equally shaped by, and agents of, history finds expression in these texts as, amongst other things, anxieties around: the kind of nationalism to be fostered for independence from colonialism (*Home and the World*), and the nation-building afterwards (*Wheat*). As such, despite the tragedy of Ray's ending, it is Bimala who makes this history possible to recuperate in full (the film is her flashback). Similarly, even as *Wheat* cannot incorporate the political consciousness of its female characters into its vision, this serves to uncover the complex entanglement of anti-colonial nationalism and gender in this novel's historical moment.

That some anti-colonial nationalisms invest in future neocolonialisms when they work to minimise the risk to patriarchy that independence may bring is a necessary and uncomfortable critique. It is one that the following texts examined in this study certainly contain, though not always confront. The following chapter considers a novel by Ayi Kwei Armah and a film by Ousmane Sembène, both of which paint a politically bleak picture that delves into the neocolonial set-ups in post-independence Ghana and Senegal respectively. Both narratives explore the crises of subjectivity that their postcolonial bourgeoisies experience as a result of their own colonial formations and comprador economic activities, stressing the all too material effects of such crises amongst elite subjectivities upon the working classes of their newly independent nations.

Chapter Three

Neocolonialism's Subjects: Complicity and Resistance in Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

In 1995, Ousmane Sembène is asked about the function of beggars in his films *Xala* (1975) and *Guelwaar* (1994). He answers by raising several lines of inquiry, including: the rise of begging in Senegalese cities as an expression of the country's socio-economic situation; the fate of nations that raise begging from other nations to state policy; and begging as utilised in West African ritual for symbolic atonement and social rehabilitation. "Everything holds together, but it is up to you to analyse it and make up your own mind on it," he concludes (1995, 175). Enriched and strengthened by this ability to hold contradiction, Sembène's cinematic practice sustains what Sam Okoth Opondo identifies as "the ambiguity and multiplicity of African times and lived experiences" (2015, 41), while centring Africans as agents of their own representation. Sembène's fourth feature-length film *Xala* (1975), which addresses the betrayal of the social, political and economic promises of independence within the space of a decade, is exemplary of the above attributes in its attempts to diagnose why, and how, these promises did not bear fruit. Adapted by Sembène for a mass audience from his own novel (Gugler and Diop 1998, 147), this satirical story about a businessman who gets the *xala* (the curse of impotence) before he can consummate his third marriage deploys allegory in multiple ways to describe Senegal's post-independence neocolonial conditions. The ways in which these conditions determine the very formation of subjectivities, in turn inseparable from the structural processes of national decolonisation, is a relation that informs the crux of *Xala*'s critical thrust.

Ayi Kwei Armah was among the very first African writers to question the meaning of independence from colonial rule, and to address the continent's continuing

dependence on the West. He was born in 1939 to Fante-speaking parents in Takoradi, Ghana, and his first novel received critical attention for its uncompromising attack on the Ghanaian elite for their role in generating the moral and economic bankruptcy of post-independence society. Laden with the disappointments of the failed socialist promises of anti-colonial nationalism, *Beautiful Ones* narrates a Ghana betrayed by the very class that promised liberation. The narrative follows an unnamed man who works as a clerk in the Railway Traffic Control Office. His job is monotonous, but provides some satisfaction in that it is a place to be and a thing to do. Within such a routine, he muses, “it was not so difficult to forget the self and the world against which it had to live” (Armah 1969, 182). Yet the man seems to neither count himself entirely as one of the “suffering sleepers” around him, nor amongst those who have “found in themselves the hardness for the upward climb” (23). In fact, forgetting and remembering the self, as he experiences cycles of both refusal and self-comparison with the category of “climbers”, is to become the man’s trajectory in the novel. Centring the man’s subjective experience on our understanding of the material conditions that Armah critiques, the novel, as Jarrod Dunham (2012) observes, also “positions individual characters in relation to one another in interactions that mirror and amplify Armah’s larger social concerns” (281). Its political agenda is enabled, problematised and strengthened in equal measure by these two interpenetrating portrayals: the everyday interiority of the protagonist, and his relations with others.

This chapter examines how *Xala* and *Beautiful Ones* approach the question of subjectivity under these circumstances, while seeking to understand the influence of such material conditions upon consciousness. Proposing that the central allegory of the film and the novel – the national Senegalese and Ghanaian elites respectively as complicit against and/or unable to spearhead decolonisation – yields a structural analysis of the relationship between subjectivity and arrested decolonisation, I intend to trace how Sembène and Armah explore this relation via different but related aesthetic and political themes. In both *Xala* and *Beautiful Ones*, the loss of the hope that independence would facilitate a process of decolonisation provokes a search for the causes and extent of the present decay; what emerges is that subjectivities themselves

are at stake (being shaped as they are by the material structures of neocolonial capital). Their re-constitution under these conditions, determined by both the former imperial power and an increasingly US-centric economic world order, signals lasting repercussions for West African societies.

In *Xala*, the themes of self-fashioning, language, and land in the film provide inroads for reading how the false consciousness of the native bourgeoisie; the French language; and land dispossession all endanger in various economic and social ways the transformation of post-independence Senegal. Through these lines of critique, *Xala* maintains that structures and subjectivities are inseparably bound under conditions of neo-colonialism, with the future of national decolonisation dependent upon the transformation of both. Sembène's formal and diegetic choices – including innovative use of aural and visual misalignment; costume and props; and the narrative reveal of its climax – demonstrate how the crises of subjectivity of the powerful, particularly in the post-independence context, have serious material ramifications on society. As such, exposing the subjective effects of neocolonial conditions on individuals, whilst gesturing to collective ways already available in his society for refusing their effects, are fundamental aspects of Sembène's political critique and cinematic practice.

Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* has been read in terms of its political criticism of the native elite in Nkrumah's post-independence Ghana, and for its treatment of individual consciousness – but these elements have often been treated in isolation from each other. Arguing that, on the contrary, the novel establishes a nuanced interdependency between subjectivity and the material everyday of neocolonialism, this chapter complements *Xala*'s analysis of the comprador bourgeoisie's internalisation of colonial structures with Armah's exploration of the psycho-social effects of such structures on the subjectivity of its protagonist, a working-class Ghanaian.³¹ I turn to the

³¹ I use "working class" within its African contexts and positions, which include, in the example of Armah's protagonist, a wage labourer involved in metals transportation within a post-independence, single-commodity export economy. See also Leo Zeilig's edited volume, *Class Struggle and Resistance in Africa* (2008), for essays covering various markers of "working class" as understood in its contemporary African contexts.

novel's structuring motifs, multi-temporality and interiority, to trace how Armah illustrates the self and its socio-economic conditions to be mutually constitutive, explanatory and effectual. The neocolonial circumstances that Armah's protagonist navigates each day equip him with the consciousness to historicise his psychic malaise.

Although Armah's novel is very dark where Sembène's film is frequently farcical, *Beautiful Ones* is cautious to assign the faith Sembène does to the dispossessed peasantry/urban *lumpenproletariat*. Armah's novel, with his often-divided protagonist, is not turning away from the anti-colonial values *Xala* turns to for solutions to neocolonialism, but its conception of selfhood as that which simultaneously refuses to sever itself from the material reality that shapes it, and refuses to reconcile itself to it, means it does not necessarily turn to one class position or experience as the location of radical consciousness. The possibility of resistance is located in the fact that Armah's protagonist's interiority is informed by his experiential understanding of the same material reality as those within the society he views so critically. It comes about only by experiencing the same temptations and hardships, not performing his politics at a class remove. The novel thus complements *Xala*'s exposé of the mass structural consequences of a small class's false consciousness, but also gestures critically towards what a resistant subject, responsive to such corrupt conditions, might be.

I

The filming of *Xala* took place within the context of the neocolonial state of affairs it satirises, a context at once a powerful motivator for Sembène and a constant practical challenge. France's anxieties around the power of film in shaping public opinion was evident in decrees such as Le Décret Laval, which sought to "control the content of films that were shot in Africa and to minimise the creative roles played by Africans in the making of films" (Diawara 1992, 23). Despite this and more hurdles, cinema's pedagogical and ideological value, along with its close affinity to African oral traditions thanks to its figurative and gestural potential, could not be forgone. "Since ours is an oral culture, I wanted to show reality through masks, dance, and

representations. The publication of a book written in French reaches only a minority, whereas via film one can do as Dziga Vertov did with his ‘Kino Pravda’”, Sembène believed (Levieux 2004).

Some have therefore pointed out that Sembène’s opting for the language of cinema even “fulfils the same function as the Gikūyū language does for Ngūgĩ” (Messier 2011, 4). His work's commitment to African futurity certainly bears parallels to Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o’s political rationale for setting aside English, although Sembène’s films may not quite share the same emphasis on ethnocultural return. For example, as the subsequent discussion of self-fashioning will illustrate, the film’s disapproval of the Senegalese bourgeoisie’s substitution of diverse, dynamic, quotidian kinds of African cultures for the fictitious monolith they applaud as “Africanity” better aligns Sembène’s critique with Frantz Fanon's warning that the African comprador bourgeoisie will reify African cultures: “Long speeches will be made about the artisan class... [the native elites] will surround the artisan class with a chauvinistic tenderness in keeping with the new awareness of national dignity” (2001, 119). Furthermore, Lindiwe Dovey has shown that lifelong Marxists like Sembène and Sarah Maldoror disapproved of adopting wholesale the Soviet approach for filmmaking in Africa (2020). Whereas both felt indebted to the dialectical montage of Sergei Eisenstein, they felt a “lack of freedom” to explore form during their cinematic training in socialist realism in the USSR (Dovey 5). For Sembène, this especially meant the freedom to explore the possibilities of a dialectical cinema that could nonetheless include some African oral storytelling techniques.

Xala pursues some syntheses in this regard as it unfolds the tension between the protagonist El-Hadji’s outward display of potency and his actual impotence, stripping away his ability to sustain the financial and sexual markers of his identity. As he grows obsessed with his ailment, paying several *marabouts* extortionate amounts for a cure, the financial, psychological and sexual scaffolding of El-Hadji’s position are stripped

away. As such, *Xala* has been interpreted with close reference to Fanon's exposé of African elites as the West's business agent (Guneratne and Dissanayake 2003; Mushengyezi 2004; Kilian 2010; Lindo 2010). Drawing from Fredric Jameson (1986) and Roy Armes (1987), this body of scholarship has insightfully traced how El-Hadji's behaviour is dictated by a class "whose meaning and purpose are determined by forces apparently coming from the outside" (Sorensen 2010, 223), via drawing "a relation between the private and public: stories of individualised characters or configurations figure a broader public, collective context whose signified is national" (Rosen 1996, 35).

Broadly agreeing with these materialist analyses of *Xala* as an example of *cinéma engagé* (Gadjigo 2008; Landy 1984; Opondo 2015), I seek to draw attention here to Sembène's relatively under-explored but related interest in the relationship between these aforementioned neocolonial conditions and the formation of subjectivities. *Xala* is concerned with subjectivities under the formative influence of those neocolonial material conditions that the above scholars have discussed come to inform consciousness. We know that one of Sembène's core investigations throughout his early cinematic *oeuvre* – from *La Noire De...* (1966) and *Mandabi* (1968) to *Xala* – is that of West Africa's thwarted decolonisation. But the inseparable, albeit varied, relationship between this structural problem and the problem of the effects these structural injustices have upon the interiorities of West Africans of all classes is central to *Xala*. Treated not as an addendum but a psycho-social force that results from, and in turn effects, the post-independence situation of Senegal, *Xala's* critique of this relationship between French West Africa's economic situation and its effects at the level of subjectivities is crucial, I will argue, to understanding (in addition to and beyond the existing scholarship) *Xala's* treatment of subjectivity as revealing of neocolonial capitalism's designs upon the African continent. Continuing apace from the 1980s onwards via the separation of Africans from the products of their labours, neocolonialism's manufactured separation between the individual-subjective and the

collective-social, *Xala* illustrates through its protagonist, will depend ever more on conflating purchasing power with ontological security.

As El-Hadji's class enacts mere spectacles of nationalist resistance to legitimise their lifestyles of mimicry, they are also transforming the former's demand for economic self-determination into the freedom of consumer choice. They, in Fanon's words, are not only "set in the mould of the former mother country" themselves, but also "hasten to send the people back to their caves" after independence because their class has not taken the "primordial task" of raising popular political consciousness is "to heart" (2001, 145). As Fanon's psycho-social terminology implies, the threat is not that this class has hinged the constitution of their subjectivities upon consumer capitalism, but that the populace is internalising what they are seeing and are therefore on the receiving end of a combination of distraction and deliberate prevention from their noting the actual crime at hand – that of collective wealth theft by the post-independence elite. This is revealed to us at the end of the film by Gorgui, the leader of the beggars. Examining Sembène's approach to self-fashioning and language as the film builds up to the reveal of land theft as what ultimately sets in motion, prior to the temporality of the narrative itself, El-Hadji's process of de-subjectification, I will seek to demonstrate how the film arrives at social embeddedness and social responsibility as powerful means of constituting subjectivities that challenge the post-independence order.

To probe the aforementioned connections that *Xala* illuminates between neocolonial material conditions and the formation of subjectivities, I will pay close attention to certain diegetic and aesthetic choices that particularly work in the service of these connections: namely, how the film presents self-fashioning as a site for meaning-making that has wide political-economic implications, and how the visuals of those scenes where the politics of language come to the fore – an element less considered than dialogue in scholarship focused on Sembène's use of language in this film (Vetinde

2012; Murphy 2002) – complicates dichotomous interpretations of the character of Rama. As such, although I broadly agree with work like Matthew H. Brown’s (2015) which posits that *Xala*’s allegory constructs characters’ subjectivities in relation to collective concerns, I propose that it is by seeing this relationality as *Xala*’s starting point, rather than its representational goal, that we can understand how and why the film then utilises the issue of subjectivity to deepen its political critique (Jilani, in press). It is not a translation *from* but a relation *between* subjectivity and the material realities of arrested decolonisation that *Xala* demonstrates, as characters are not just stand-ins for his class critique but a fundamental part of that critique in that they either reach for or reject (whether consciously or unconsciously) the logics of neocolonialism and consumer capitalism in order to help constitute their subjectivities. In showing the viewer how the neocolonialism of the native bourgeoisie endangers the transformation of African societies, the themes of land, self-fashioning and language provide Sembène inroads into representing the relation between subjectivity and material decolonisation as it unfolds in the everyday lives of Senegalese of different classes. Housed in the “wax” of satire and allegory, to draw from Teshome Gabriel’s conceptualisation (1980), is not only the “gold” that is the “ideological significance” of *Xala* (Landy 1984, 41), but the “gold” that is its politicisation of subject-formation within the historical context of neocolonialism in West Africa.

II

Self-fashioning, in the very literal sense of clothing intended to indicate certain characteristics about oneself that are socially understood, is of collective political consequence in *Xala*. The persisting effects of colonial ideologies on Senegal’s post-independence ruling classes are unmistakable in the sartorial choices of the president of the Chamber of Commerce, El-Hadji, and their fellow “socialist” businessmen. Although the European suits of this class of men, and the French dresses sported by El-Hadji’s second wife Oumi N’Doye, have been discussed as indicative of the native ruling class’s alignment with Western interests (Messier 2011, 14; Gugler and Diop

1998, 149), less has been said on how this also reveals a self-fashioning based on the idea of imitation, rather than full affiliation with the neocolonial power. The French suits here works largely to signify in private El-Hadji's mark of belonging in the Chamber of Commerce: a space cut off both from the life of the nation, *and* from where the flows of Western capital are decided. This self-delusion – infantile in its satisfaction with the mere cosmetics of power – is affirmed when Sembène shows that these men essentially “dress up” on Independence Day in order to receive a designated amount of Francs in briefcases from white deputies. This class mimicry without economic autonomy signifies a loss (or indeed, sale) of self, given how quickly they change costume from the opening scene where, dressed in everyday *boubous*, they were waved into the Chamber by a joyful crowd. This is encapsulated in a banal exchange where El-Hadji proclaims to his fellow businessmen that “modernity mustn't make us lose our Africanity”. This prompts another member, dressed in an extravagant white tuxedo, to applaud and respond enthusiastically: “Too right! Long live Africanity!” The moment is reminiscent of the critique Fanon made in *Toward the African Revolution* (1964, 196) when he warned an “absence of ideology” was “the greater danger which threatens Africa” at the cusp of the independences. Amílcar Cabral echoed him when he remarked that “Africa's postcolonial history is one of unfulfilled missions because the national leadership has been lacking in revolutionary theory and ideology” (1966, n.p.). El-Hadji and his class partake of a surface mimicry that borrows ideological terms like “modernity” and “Africanity”, but not out of some attempt to find syntheses (if that is what their proclamation is meant to suggest, and if we were to grant any stability to these two concepts).³² They do so instead by capitalising on “ideology as smorgasbord”, in Barbara Foley's description, wherein “ruling-class hegemony, as well as enhanced possibilities for capital accumulation, can be secured by any number of routes of ideological transmission” (2019, 70). The men in this scene, chameleon-like in their quick succession of changes in self-stylisation, dip into being harbingers of “modernity” (some vague idea of capitalist growth), and then into being the defenders of “Africanity” – through a dubious interpretation, as Vartan Messier points out (2011, 13),

³² See also Paul A. Beckett (1980) on Fanon's critique of the “absence of ideology” amongst post-independence African governments and leaders.

of what the Qur'an actually contains on the subject of polygamy. What brings Sembène's critique full circle here to the question of who these men even are – what cultural, social and economic affiliations help constitute their subjectivities – is that their use of "ideology as smorgasbord" secures them only petty accumulation, not hegemony or economic autonomy. As the white French deputy who looms silently behind the president of the Chamber reminds us the viewer, El-Hadji and his class have no ideology, whether "modernity" (capitalist restructuring) or "Africanity", and they have received no real power in exchange for their cipher-like subjectivities in a global order to which 1970s Senegal is bound via the terms of French neocolonialism.

Sembène adds a temporal layer to these significant sartorial choices through a disjunction between voice-over and diegetic action in this opening sequence, wherein a temporal lag between the visuals on screen and the voice-over interpreting what we are seeing builds expectations of a particular future that, in simultaneous on-screen time, is being rendered improbable. For instance, in the lead-up to the meeting, the voice-over tells of transforming Senegal's economic and political structures according to the will of its people: "We must control our industry, our commerce, our culture, in order to take into our hands our destiny". The images on-screen are at first harmonious with this audio. Into the Chamber enter a group of Senegalese men dressed in plain *boubous*; some escort the European deputies out of the room, while others remove marble busts of Marie Antoinette and Napoleon Bonaparte and leave them outside for people to see.³³ Jubilant drumming sounds in the background as the public celebrates. The full cultural, political and economic restitution implied by this sequence is then swiftly disrupted by a costume change: the very same men return to the Chamber in the aforementioned suits the following day, but the voice-over has not yet finished recounting the revolutionary days to come. Despite the aural continuity of these two scenes, the fluidity of the men's self stylisations present an unmistakable visual juxtaposition. A central tenet of the theory of the Soviet school of filmmaking, the ideological and aesthetic grounds for

³³ So revealing were the scenes where Marie Antoinette's bust is removed and French deputies hand over briefcases of money to the Senegalese elite that they were censored in France (Sembène in Busch and Annas 2008, 75).

utilising montage in jarring ways to generate meaning would have been familiar to Sembène from his film education in Moscow. He adapts the technique here to work beyond the spatial (two shots contrasting in content) by extending to the temporal level this overlay of contradiction (the bringing together of two jarring narratives about national decolonisation, one in visual terms, costume, and one in aural, voice-over). This separation of audio and image in the film's introduction relates the implications of the self-fashionings of El-Hadji and his class upon the future of their society as a whole, and reveals that their subjectivities are severed from their cultural and social moorings for no real political and economic gain.

Self-fashioning in *Xala* connects the constitution of subjectivities to the material circumstances of neocolonialism not only on these negative terms of mimicry, but also on promising terms through examples of effortless cultural fusion. After the opening sequence, the film introduces an array of characters who prefer the fez or the head wrap, including a farmer whose storyline merges with the beggars; Adja Awa Astou, El-Hadji's devout first wife; and characters who, according to the spaces they move in, switch between *boubous* and the fashions of a global 1970s youth counter-culture, such as El-Hadji's daughter Rama.³⁴ However, as *Xala's* sartorial choices thus set up what may be examples of subject-positions that arise from lived experience, so do they complicate any simple pairings such as elites/falsehood and masses/authenticity. This ambiguity, I would contend, results from Sembène's dialectical point-of-view rather than some kind of relativism. A somewhat tragicomic scene that complicates these binaries, for instance, does so in ways that do not posit this ambiguity as natural or found. Instead, it draws our attention to the mutually effectual relationship between subjectivities and a material neocolonialism (here symbolised by a commodity an ordinary person can afford). A young man who looks neither poor nor desperate steals a farmer's money in the midst of a street commotion, then goes to a tailor to spend his stolen funds on a strange new outfit: a dark suit similar to that of the Frenchmen of the Chamber, plus an American cowboy hat.

³⁴ See also Ophélie Rillon (2018) on youth fashion and politics in '60s and '70s West Africa.



Fig. 5: An aspiring Franco-American? (Dir. Ousmane Sembène, 1975)

As the viewer soon finds out that what he stole were the precious savings of a farmer's entire village, this sequence cements *Xala's* sartorial allegory as one about the relationship between the shaping of subjectivities now, and the economic system under implementation. The suggestion that American capital has an entire market to gain upon any weakening of French cultural hegemony in West Africa is clear: the kitsch symbol of the U.S., the cowboy hat, has quite literally been bought into in this scene by an ordinary Senegalese citizen, with money stolen from the overwhelmingly agrarian country's most productive class. Thus any facile notion of the ordinary citizen/the "masses" as "authentic" is troubled by the fact that, in this scene, Sembène shows us how those symbols and objects that the African working classes reach for in order to style themselves in the public sphere are beginning to mirror the commodity worship that informs the subjectivities of El-Hadji and his elite class. The ontological security sought by the ordinary person who is dispossessed, unemployed and/or marginalised in post-independence Senegalese society is here shown as being capitalised on by American cultural imperialism, turning the constitution of selfhood into a mere exercise in consumer choice; it is subjectivity free of any social embeddedness or social obligation. In the true victim here being the robbed farmer, the scene also brings us to the foundational issue that Sembène will later reveal as having set the story in motion well before it started: the direct and indirect theft of land. *Xala's* attention to sartorial and other modes of self-fashioning in this first half of the film thus initiate the viewer

into the foundational – and rapidly transforming – relationality that is to prove key throughout the film.

III

Xala's treatment of language consolidates this relationality and its social consequences, while raising important questions regarding the persistence of colonialism's legacy despite evolved appearances. In an interview, Sembène argues that "[The El-Hadji] types are alienated to such an extent... [that] they are always the first to say people's mentalities have to be decolonised, but it is actually [theirs] which has to be," (2008, 73). Elsewhere, he has related this idea about decolonisation on a subjective level ("mentalities") to the functionings of French in Senegal, saying he "has no complex about using French [...] it is no more or less than a working tool" (Sembène in Fofana 2012, 105). His choosing a psychiatric term is telling. The notion of not making French "a complex" is one that Fanon identifies as a subjective and structural task of decolonisation, for the French language itself has a hand in creating the "internalisation – or, better, epidermalisation, of this inferiority complex" (1986, 4). Due to the impossibility of dissociating a language from the cultural values it perpetuates, for Fanon, "to speak... means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation" (1986, 89). This, of course, recalls the power of language in (post)colonial contexts to perpetuate or challenge, at one and the same time, cultural alienation (the internalisation of colonial hierarchies) and material conditions (the literally crushing "weight" of Europe's "civilisation" on the colonised). Running parallel, however, is the complexity of language politics in Senegal; in the case of Wolof, an African language that has spread "far beyond the boundaries of its core ethnicity" (O'Brien 1998, 25), the problem of linguistic hegemony arises today, as "Wolof becomes coextensive with the Senegalese nation itself" (Smith 2010, 69).

While the cultural and political meaning of French in *Xala* is a point of discussion in most Sembène scholarship (Harrow 1980; Mushengyezi 2004; Vetinde 2012), these Fanonian “psychopolitics” (Hook 2004) have not necessarily been unpacked in those analyses of El-Hadji’s preference for French and his daughter Rama’s for Wolof that choose to respectively interpret them as representing the neocolonial present and the revolutionary pan-African future. As one who has wholeheartedly embraced the economic practices of the neocolonial nation-state, French is undoubtedly “a complex” for El-Hadji in the sense Sembène uses it above. We witness on several occasions he insists on replying in French when spoken to in Wolof; shouts in frustration at Rama when not spoken to in French; and in his only moment of rebellion in the film, where he lists the hypocrisies of his fellow businessmen, he is cowed into continuing in French even though he began in Wolof. What I am interested in here is proceeding from the established interpretation of this as an allegory of the Senegalese bourgeoisie’s willing alignment with neocolonial capitalism, to examining its functioning at the level of Sembène’s related concern: that of El-Hadji’s “mentality”, which I will seek to highlight as a decidedly *material* component of Sembène’s class critique – and that of whether educated African youth, symbolised by Rama, are positioned to undo this collective “mentality” that has material consequences.

The function of French brings the viewer to the heart of one of the film's key concerns: that such seemingly subjective “complexes” of the native elite, which play out in private (between father and daughter, wife and husband), matter because they influence the daily lives of a majority who may be grappling with no such “complexes”. “We have a bourgeoisie who only feel significant when they express themselves in French,” Sembène observes (2008, 73). It is this collective inferiority complex, borne of subjectivities that draw on closeness to the Western bourgeoisie for their ontological security, that Sembène suggests results in insidious long-term effects on the material lives of ordinary people – people who have urgent material needs that need the postcolonial state’s attention, and may or may not be experiencing any such cultural alienation like that of their elites. A satirical scene captures this well: “El-Hadji may

speak, but only if in French,” pronounces the president of the Chamber of Commerce after El-Hadji is voted out of his position for neglecting his debts. “Even the insults, in the purest Francophone tradition!” he adds, in utter seriousness. This may seem comical, but as Sembène points out, it is no more so than a bourgeoisie “[who] speaks to the peasants in French. In a country with 80 percent illiteracy, speeches, which are supposed to talk about their problems, go right over their heads” (2008, 74). This is the far more urgent critique that *Xala* seeks to arrive at: that “when the bourgeoisie committed this flagrant error [of aspiring to France], they drew an entire people after them” (Sembène 2008, 74), summarised in the image of people being spoken to about their everyday problems by those who seek to signal status to foreign powers, rather than to be understood by their own citizens. In *Xala*, the urgency of these conditions of “linguistic drama” (Albert Memmi 1965, 108) and “psychological drama” (Fofana 2012, 103) lie not in the cultural alienation of the African bourgeoisie, but in its wider structural consequences.

A more critical approach to the character of Rama also proves insightful, because if we are to sustain the canonical reading of her as the symbol of a politically conscious, youth vanguard of pan-African socialism, we arrive at the interpretation that the atonement, re-education, or re-socialisation of the governing class (a successful embodiment being the next generation, in El-Hadji's daughter) is what Sembène is suggesting will liberate African societies. There is, however, cause – in both widely available biographical knowledge of the director (Berthomé 2007; Gadjigo 2008) and in *Xala* itself – to argue that such an interpretation de-radicalises Sembène's vision. On the contrary, as *Xala*'s attention to the many dimensions of language choice in the ostensible “private” and “public” spaces of the film suggest, the “complexes” of this class are manifest in widespread and *material* ways – they have given shape to the practices of self-stylisation and social signalling that bespeak power in post-independence society. As such, liberation (which may or may not include the disalienation of this class) cannot but be the transformation of material life itself. Understood within this context of Sembène's politics, the character of Rama begins to draw attention to the fact that the

fraught and overlapping terrain of language and subjectivity in postcolonial Senegal leaves few out of its remit.

El-Hadji's eldest daughter prefers the common linguistic practices of Senegal (which is to use French primarily for official business) and makes a point of otherwise speaking in Wolof. Arguably, in Rama's pragmatic approach, French suffers a stronger ideological blow than outright rejection: reduced to supplementariness, it recall's Sembène's own position on French as "a working tool" (Sembène in Fofana 2012, 105). But much has also been written, not least by Fanon, on how political consciousness does not mark an end to the identity struggles of postcolonial intelligensias, who often situate themselves in relation to two systems of cultural reference. Is Rama's reduction of French to supplementarity *Xala's* suggested antidote to neocolonial Senegal? As a young Pan-Africanist, her refusal to address her father in French is a declaration of political separation from the older generation. This angers and discomfits El-Hadji, certainly, and underscores *Xala's* critique of language as a "locus of unconscious servility" (Trinh T. Minh-Ha 1989, 52). Through Rama's position, the viewer also understands that the use of French "estranges [El-Hadji] from his own child and even from himself. It makes him feel like someone else by drawing a line of demarcation between him and the majority of people in his own society" (Fofana 2012, 103).

However, we can assume the neocolonial socio-economic conditions depicted in *Xala* determine the contours of Rama's political potential, because these conditions determine the very subjectivities that daily grapple with them. For instance, Rama's fluent French response to a police officer who stops her, in addition to the fact that she is driving her own car at the time, together function as a class-based warning to the postcolonial authorities that she is not to be harassed. This is on the one hand a subject-positioning necessitated by Senegal's post-independence reality, where French and Wolof have their domains – institutional and social, respectively. But as Rama warns authority of her consciousness of and ability to understand the role of French in tactics

of everyday domination, she becomes a more ambivalent character than scholarly interpretations of her radicalism suggest. If El-Hadji and his class perpetuate their unconscious servility via (and in turn bind the nation to) La Francophonie, what are we to make of Rama, a politically conscious elite woman, choosing to utilise it for mobility and access?



Fig. 6: Rama's mobility (Dir. Ousmane Sembène, 1975)

The exclusivity of this mobility and access is undeniable: in another scene, Rama rides her motorcycle to her father's office and is welcomed deferentially by his security guard, who is otherwise tasked with forcing beggars away from the building (*Fig. 6*). Given that through El-Hadji *Xala* has established that the consequences of language use in the postcolonial context are ones directly related to the formation of subjectivity, Rama's occasional weaponisation of French cannot be without social and subjective consequences.

Although Rama's politics means she is attuned to the substance of this everyday to a greater extent than her father, *Xala* hints at the asymmetrical oppressions of the bourgeoisie's embrace of La Francophonie (a crisis of subjectivity for them, material deprivation for the masses). In thus implying that the cultural imperialism of La Francophonie may not be necessarily be confronted by the children of the West African bourgeoisie, Sembène points to the fact that embracing African languages and cultures

neither indicates the economic liberation of the continent, nor necessarily the end of colonialism's legacy at the level of "mentalities". This is not to say the rejuvenation of African languages is not an important idea of anti-colonialism and cultural liberation, but to open up a space for recognising that *Xala* also has important misgivings about its usage as a substitute for the many material projects of decolonisation. Therefore, although at first seemingly a straightforward allegory that functions via the setting up of clear dichotomies (El-Hadji/Rama, old/young, Francophile/Pan-African, bourgeois/revolutionary), language is a "specific relationship to the world" and the self (Ngũgĩ 1981, 16), and its ability to shape that relationship still, the film demonstrates, lies in its economic power, however cultural its manifestations also are.

IV

Collective wealth theft, which the climax of the film explicitly reveals as having its foundations in land theft, is the crux via which *Xala* makes its decisive linkage between the constitution of subjectivities and the material conditions of neocolonialism. Before the spitting ritual that marks the film's striking ending begins, the beggars' blind leader Gorgui reveals that he has been rendered landless by the expropriation of Lebu lands – people to whom Gorgui (and distantly, El-Hadji) belong, and who gradually lost their land throughout the late 1970s to 80s as they were bought for a pittance then opened to privatisation. "What I am now is your fault. Do you remember selling a large piece of land at Jeko belonging to our clan? After falsifying the clan names, you took our land from us," Gorgui accuses. Land loss also signifies here the loss of things that reassure one's subjectivity, including lineage, family, place, labour practices, communal knowledges and interpersonal relations that surround and form a life of living upon the land. The historical background to which this plot twist gestures is one that allows Sembène to make a direct link between colonial and post-independence conditions in Senegal. Public health concerns were first used by the colonial authorities in Dakar in 1916 to segregate the city and expropriate land, eradicating certain Lebu villages completely (Goldblatt 2020). At the time of *Xala*'s making, but gaining momentum in

the early 1980s in Senegal, was the commodification of land organised around family networks; the Lebu progressively lost much of their remaining land (and with it, their customary labours in agriculture and fishing).³⁵ The once-collective ownership of land in kinship networks functions in *Xala* in articulation of “the space of a past and future utopia – a social world of collective cooperation” (Jameson 1986, 84), which the new post-independence national bourgeoisie have exchanged in return for integration into the global capitalist economy at its lowest rungs. It unearths the “clientelist strategies of political and economic control” of the “rentier class” (Boone 1990, 426-7) in Senegal that facilitated neither socialist transformation nor local capital accumulation, leaving the majority of the nation dependent upon connections to or aspirations towards being the political class.

This exposé is an understood reading of Sembène’s film, but has less often been expanded on in the context of its climax, where discussion has focused on the scene’s ritualistic punishment and/or purification of the bourgeoisie by the people (Brown 2015; Mushengyezi 2004; Lynn 2004). Yet it is also a climax wherein the El-Hadjis of the nation are confronted for their utilising at face-value their social and economic ties to their poorer kin (who may assume their better-off brethren still sustain the familial codes they do) in order to secure their trust, whilst eschewing the responsibilities of being the keepers of this trust. It also illustrates that the postcolonial elite’s crises of subjectivity, deriving amongst other things from their cultural mimicry and refusal of customary social responsibilities, is not just a product of the historic colonialism that dispossessed them to a degree too, but of independence – independence of the kind that sustained conditions amenable to clientelism. As such, although “Sembène’s portrayal of the beggars echoes Fanon’s faith in the revolutionary potential of the *lumpenproletariat* rather than Marx’s dismissive view of it” (Gugler and Diop 1998, 149), when we situate this *lumpenproletariat* that avenges itself as the recently dispossessed peasantry that they are, we can discern the contours of a triangulation

³⁵ See also Hannah Cross (2013) on the dispossession of the Lebu and their now forming one of the largest groups of clandestine migrants to the EU.

between collective land ownership, subject-formation, and social embeddedness or intersubjectivity emerging in Sembène's climax.

This triangulation is suggested through techniques that enact a reveal and a contrast, which rely on the climax to work. The reveal is that the series of events that make up the film were triggered not by the *xala* but by an earlier act – El-Hadji's sale of his kin's land, and his subsequent running away from what Jameson coins the “primordial crime of capitalism” (1986, 84) – the theft of collective wealth. His crime is directly linked to his desubjectification; the beggars invite him to partake of the ritual so as to reclaim “the only thing he has left” to regain, his virility. The way they present this actually minimises the reclamation of what would presumably be the full resolution of the (surface) problem of the film: the curse of impotence. If his virility is “the only thing left”, the implication that he can have his manhood back (but that is all he will get back) gestures to the unsaid assertion that without embeddedness in the social relations and responsibilities that he has sold, El-Hadji has no ontological security beyond his fleeting possession of commodities. Just as that which assured Gorgui's subjectivity and economic survival (his labours upon his land) have been taken away, this invites us to interpret the climax as also one that asserts social obligation as the grounds of ontologically secure subjectivity formation.

A contrast, established in the “background” throughout the film via both narrative and formal methods, also grows clear in Sembène's final sequences. The beggars/dispossessed farmers have animated the naturalistic scenes of Dakar street life throughout *Xala*, offering blessings or playing tunes on the *khalam* as they sit on street corners in twos or threes. They are vividly differentiated through their physical appearance, age and bearing, suggesting a multiplicity of voices and experiences. Their collective way of life, however, has ensured their survival: we witness, for example, the group preparing tea for everyone using a tin of condensed milk one of their number have procured, inviting the distraught farmer to join them and unburden himself.

Gorgui, to nobody's protest, silently hands the farmer a portion of what must have been everyone's hard-earned cash from that morning. This scene is one of several that establish the beggars/dispossessed farmers operate with an entirely different set of values – ones that draw on solidarity in their shared socio-economic circumstances, customary Wolof social bonds, and perhaps also Islamic teachings against covetousness – in order to help fashion the morals they sustain within their group. They embody what Sam Opondo identifies as an “engagement with the micro-political and transgressive practices of everyday life” in Sembène's entire *oeuvre* (2015, 41), an engagement that highlights the capacities of the most powerless to create social change. This is cemented by the transformative experience the companionship of the beggars have on the farmer: they are more politically conscious than the latter, and in their company, the farmer who initially accepted the theft of his village funds as *qadr* (Allah's divine preordainment) grows to recognise he is due reparations in this life.

The beggars' powerfully collectivised subjectivities under conditions of marginalisation contrast with El-Hadji's comfortable condition and utterly desubjectified state in the finale (his job, credit, two wives, and all children but Rama gone). This allows Sembène to demonstrate an altogether different relation between the processes of subjectivity formation and the material conditions of neocolonialism. With the social and political meaning of their act established, the beggars transform their subjective sufferings into an act of collective refusal – they refuse to demand El-Hadji's stolen wealth as compensation for their land loss, and they refuse to await from his class a justice they cannot deliver. The close of *Xala* seals what my reading has sought to highlight: that Sembène's film begins from an understanding that the necessary confrontation with neocolonialism may be beyond the consciousness of the West African political class to see, and beyond its capacity (or desire) to undo. It proceeds to unpack the very subjectivities that neocolonial conditions – encapsulated in the primary crime of land theft – have constituted, and the social embeddedness and responsibility that promise other grounds for subjectivity formation. In accepting the ritual, El-Hadji finally accepts the power of the social bonds he sold away, but the film ends before we

know whether or not his *xala* is cured – whether or not, in other words, he can return from his rejection of intersubjectivity and social responsibility, the sources of the collective power and agency of the other subjectivities present in this climactic ending.

Xala urges sight of the relationship between structures and subjectivities under conditions of neocolonialism, speaking to the configurations of power that authorise elites as well as holding accountable the actions of individuals within all classes of Senegalese society (albeit some more than others). It warns of those crises of subjectivity amongst the West African elite that compound the material and cultural losses of the wider populace. Examined in relation to this is the foundational promise of ontological and structural decolonisation that land restitution and redistribution holds. With the reveal of the “primordial crime” of collective wealth theft and El-Hadji’s desubjectification, subjectivity emerges as a conducive site of agency for the beggars/dispossessed farmers. It is informed by their social embeddedness, via which they have collectivised their lived experiences of oppression. Having demystified the mechanisms by which they have been marginalised, they refuse to be paid off in exchange for being severed from the land and their labours. In Armah’s novel, however, the reader is plunged into a more pervasive and physically debilitating situation that makes such agency difficult to sustain indeed.

V

In a scene just prior to the climax of Armah’s first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), the nameless protagonist and his wife are taken home in the chauffeur-driven car of their acquaintances: Joseph Koomson, a corrupt minister in an ostensibly socialist government, and his wife Estella, who rarely “reconcile[s] herself to being an African” (Armah 1969, 155). The protagonist’s mental state exhibits a particular kind of exhaustion:

How was the man ever going to be able to fight against all the things and all the loved ones who never ceased urging that nothing else mattered, that the way was not important, that the end of life was the getting of these comfortable things? For the self, or if not for the self, then for the loved ones, for the children (177).

What would it mean to get these “comfortable things [...] for the self”? By this point in Armah’s novel, we know what it would entail in post-independence Ghana – risk-taking, a lack of scruples, and artifice, leading to personal wealth. But what, as the reflective voice prompts us to consider, is the relationship between the self and the material conditions of a daily life spent either in the getting of, or fighting the desire to get, these “comfortable things”? The protagonist, his resolve nearly at an end, recognises an insidious but fundamental effect of the neocolonial socio-economic order in which he finds himself: that the pursuit of wealth becomes the means by which people constitute themselves as subjects, and the way intersubjective relations are conducted – how care and love are expressed, identity and recognition reinforced.

In a novel that examines both the legacies of colonialism and daily life in Nkrumah’s Ghana, this quiet moment of reflection demonstrates how the psycho-social and economic stakes of neocolonial circumstances are interwoven. While Sembène’s characters are in a sense settled into their own positions with regards to the neocolonial system at hand – with those like El-Hadji and his second wife Oumi N’Doye fully buying into its promises, while Rama and the beggars can be said to represent those who reject its imperatives. Armah’s conscience-driven protagonist allows the reader a rich glimpse into what is the far more commonplace situation for the majority of a population under neocolonial circumstances: a state wherein one everyday contemplates the ease of participating in such “normal” social conditions for the promise of integration or financial reward that it offers, and then refusing at times, acquiescing at times.

Through this tension, a nuanced interdependency is established in *Beautiful Ones* between subjectivity and the economic, one which harnesses the devices of multiple temporality and character interiority in order to suggest that neocolonial socio-economic conditions and the very subjectivities of the novel's characters are mutually constitutive, explanatory and effectual. Identifying the extent to which these connections have been addressed in existing Armah scholarship, I will propose a syncretic approach to the key concerns of these critiques, which tend to consider subjectivity and economic conditions in isolation from each other. Keeping in sight Fanon's conception of subjectivity, where the self is a material phenomenon that has a corresponding interiority, my reading seeks to demonstrate how *Beautiful Ones*, which offers no narrative or political resolution, nonetheless gestures at the condition from which resistance can stem: consciousness of one's embodied experience within one's material conditions. In charting its protagonist's understanding of his relation to the neocolonial economy and to other people, the novel situates subjectivity as an essential terrain in the struggle to transform society.

Scholarship on *Beautiful Ones* has examined Armah's novel for the way it exposes political, historical and socio-economic forces, and also in terms of the individual's struggle within and against society – but has treated these two elements largely in isolation from one another. Materialist approaches have often prioritised the sociopolitical overtones of Armah's writing over the individual portraits of the native elite's excessive lust for material goods, and its allegorical depiction of the decay of revolutionary hope. But this approach has also had limiting effects. Armah's narrative techniques for linking the lust for wealth and economic dependence on the west are read by G. Ojong Ayuk (1984) as Armah's "fictional axe [aimed] at those leaders whose thinking has unfortunately been distorted by current materialism" (33). However, *Beautiful Ones*' careful historicisation of this lust for wealth, and its exploration of the role interiorisation can play in this "current materialism", is left under-explored. In fact, interiorisation comes to the fore in moments of the novel where Armah identifies colonial history (including complicit African chiefs) and the psychic

consequences of neocolonial capitalist conditions as equal culprits. At one point, the protagonist bitterly thinks he should “have asked [Koomson] if anything was supposed to have changed after all, from the days of chiefs selling their people for the trinkets of Europe” (Armah 1969, 176). For Derek Wright, Armah’s portrayal of the pervasive materialism of all classes in Ghana “produces a socio-cultural monolith, in which the bourgeoisie [...] absorbs into itself a wholly emulative, sycophantic and bureaucratised working class” (1989, 36).

While the complicity of all social groups is indeed, to some extent, a recurring element within the novel’s criticism of postcolonial elites and acquiescent populations, Wright reads Armah’s content and delivery as being at odds with one another, arguing that the novel “is rescued from the cartoon-like banality of its political themes, the bareness of its plot, and the suspicious simplicity of its cyclical view of history by the performance of its language” (30). Few things happen to the protagonist, whose life remains materially the same at the end as it was at the beginning, but the plot is hardly bare, for the man undoubtedly experiences changes in his relationships to himself, his wife and his own conditions. And it is, of course, the very “banality” of the neocolonial politics depicted in *Beautiful Ones*, and the “cyclical” history it laments, that imbue Armah’s remarkable language with the depth of effect that Wright implicitly celebrates. Armah certainly criticises greed, but not as an unfortunate, inescapably human drive; it has a traceable, historicisable trajectory of becoming, and manifests itself within different classes in different ways as a result of the conditions that sustain them.

Neil Lazarus’s (1987) interpretation anticipated two important critical threads that scholars of Armah have explored in the past two decades: analyses of the potent bleakness of the material reality depicted and its underlying causes, such as John Lutz’s (2003) comments on commodity fetishism and conspicuous consumption, and those readings, such as Minna Niemi’s (2017) Arendtian interpretation, that focus on the protagonist’s moral resilience as an indication of Armah’s grimly optimistic vision.

Through an approach that incorporates both, Lazarus reads the novel via a dialectic wherein the latent and manifest, the present and absent, are transformed from logical into ontological opposites, formulated on the premise that it is “only by knowing one’s world, by seeing it for what it is, that one can ever genuinely aspire to bring about its revolutionary transformation” (1987, 139) – its double lens being the precondition for producing knowledge that discloses the roots and causes of the national and societal decay it depicts. This kind of knowledge is the precursor to one’s actions within one’s society. However, Lazarus’s reading of this relationship as an inner voyage “couched” inside the novel’s dialectic is problematised by the text itself. Indeed, there are two particular themes, for which Armah’s language is a crucial vehicle, that make this novel a dialectical work of the kind Lazarus identifies, as well as one that approaches subjectivity not only as the location of the protagonist’s inner voyage, but also as a source of knowledge about the material contradictions of his world. The first is the theme of multi-temporality, manifest in the protagonist’s experience of disjunction between a national past/present and a subjective past/present. The second, interiority, is examined through the detailed and lyrical narration of the effects on the man’s psyche of his material everyday. Together, they explore the (neocolonial) material processes shaping both that everyday and its subjects.

For the purposes of understanding the particular relation between subjectivity and material conditions in *Beautiful Ones*, we can return to Fanon, whose *Masks* envisages a socially relational subjectivity that is constituted by the material. To recall from chapter one an aspect of Fanon’s theorisations that is particularly relevant here: his selfhood crucially remains capable of response to economic structures (such as colonialism and capitalism) in ways that can transform both its conditions and the self. “If there is an inferiority complex”, Fanon writes, “it is the outcome of a double process: first, economic. Then, internalisation” (1952, xiv-xv). He thus locates subjectivity as constituted by the sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting frameworks of politics and psychology; indeed, the self remains capable of resistance and transformation by its very refusal to conflate or sever the two. This also resonates to

an extent with Fredric Jameson's theory of cognitive mapping (1995), in that its very representability is made possible by narrative devices that must allow for the simultaneous mapping of the particular, embodied experience of material conditions, and of these conditions' existence as part of a global structure.

A term originally taken from the geographer Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (1960), "cognitive mapping" effectively describes an intersection of the personal and the social, which enables people to function in the urban spaces through which they move. For Jameson, it is a way of understanding how the individual's representation of his or her social world can escape the traditional critique of representations because the mapping is intimately related to practice – to the individual's successful negotiation of space. The knowledge gained through experiencing the everyday is not subject to the critique that representation is always only a mediated version of reality, because it is representation made and remade in and through practice – through experiencing social reality, and allowing social reality to shape one's subjectivity. This "necessarily includes the psychic and the subjective within itself" as part of the "social raw material" it draws upon (Jameson 1995, 4). Since he prioritises the question of representation, however, Jameson does not pause long on his foundational assumption that material reality constitutes subjectivity. But it is precisely this mutual interaction of "the psychic and the subjective" with "the social raw material" in Armah's novel that Fanon's conception of the self helps us locate, and begin to interpret its implications for the possibility of resistance. First, the relationship between the former two – the "psychic" and the "social raw material" – is established via the novel's use of multiple temporalities, underlining the subjective effects of neocolonial economic conditions.

VI

Armah's protagonist weaves his existence within and amongst a temporal incoherence that is not merely indicative of the political incoherence around him. It also

reflects his subjective experiencing of the contradictions that characterise the transition from the short-lived promises of anti-colonial energies to neocolonial nationhood. The man's experience of multiple times establishes an interdependency between subjectivity and nationhood that grounds the psychic within the material. There is a national time that is hurtling forwards, non-synchronous with the time of the majority of the governed, who are quite literally disoriented by their own disidentification with the present; they are the "living dead [who] could take some solace in the half-thought that there were so many others dead in life with them" (Armah 1969, 25). If, in the novel, the liberational promises of independence can be construed as a movement forwards, this is always accompanied by a reverse movement, a national time hurtling backwards (represented by a return to colonialist exploitation under another guise). The result is the psychological equivalent of motion sickness.

A valuable triangulation between nation, time and subjectivity has been proposed by Vilashini Cooppan (2009) in her book on national identity and literary form, *Worlds Within*. Cooppan proposes that the postcolonial nation can be thought of as an entity constructed through movement – one of spatial and temporal unevenness, interiorisation and exteriorisation, constituted as much by what it borders as by what it contains. Describing the nation's psychic locale and its "propensity to mix up the realms of inside and outside, past and present as it constructs the narrative of [national] identity" (2), Cooppan characterises it as one of incessant movement between distinct spaces, times and attachments through which national identification (and disidentification) comes into being. The effect of this incessant movement, however, can also be temporal disorientation, which *Beautiful Ones* configures as a state of nausea. And whilst nausea in the novel has been commented on frequently in Armah criticism, interpretations like those of Alexander Dakubo Kakraba (2011) and Derek Wright (1990) focus on disgust as its sole source – a disgust the protagonist certainly feels towards the corruption and obscene wealth disparities he witnesses in postcolonial Ghana. However, Cooppan's observation of the way postcolonial nations themselves mix past and present in order to construct themselves provides an important insight,

reminding the reader that this kind of perpetual movement is also a cause of nausea. The nation, whose crony capitalist present looks much like its colonial past, and which professes an attachment to ideologies like socialism and nationalism whilst political and economic realities suggest the very opposite, is in nauseating motion. Effecting its subjects, such a nation-time makes for a sickening experience for “the thinking mind”, as Armah’s protagonist observes: “Here we have had a kind of movement that should make even good stomachs go sick. What is painful to the thinking mind is not movement itself, but the dizzying speed of it. It is that which has been horrible” (1969, 62). Recent history is experienced viscerally within people, temporally and spatially, in the form of a daily jarring between present conditions and the circumstances that led up to it. The transformation of Nkrumahism within the space of a few short years from a revolutionary promise to cronyism weighs heavy on the man’s sense of the present. He cannot entertain progress and regress as distinct, for effects within and without are one and contradictory.

For the protagonist, and presumably those few like him who have not found that “hardness in themselves for the upward climb” (23), the effect at first seems to be paralysis. Nonetheless, this is a state that has a certain ontological and existential dynamism. This is suggested in a haunting sentence that links the new stage of capitalism Ghana has entered to a *longue durée* of colonialism, accumulation, exploitation and violence to a description of a rotting wooden banister in a government building. Encountering a repeatedly polished yet still filthy banister has him thinking of all the “diseased skin” that has touched it, in a striking metaphor on the rottenness of the foundation itself (capitalism). “In the natural course of things [the wood] would always take the newness of the different kinds of polish and it would convert all to victorious filth”. Of the individuals who daily choose to oil this economic system, he writes: “[a]nd there were, of course, people themselves, so many hands and fingers bringing help to the wood in its course toward putrefaction” (12). As dark as the metaphor is, it historicises the present state of things, painting a picture of systemic and deliberately sustained decay, rather than suggesting that “something went wrong” after

independence, or that any one individual is the orchestrator of the problem. There is unflinching clarity as to the continuities of capitalist extraction in its post-independence guise, facilitated by its post-independence beneficiaries: “[w]hat had been going on there was going on now and would go on and on through all the years ahead was a species of war carried on in the silence of the long ages” (15). The lyricism of the novel’s language is always being interrupted with a reminder that time is transforming even that which seemingly, like most objects described, is solid.

Through imagery featuring organic material produced over time, like mould, rot, sweat and faeces, these reminders are frequently delivered in obscene language: “how were these leaders to know that while they were climbing up to shit in their people’s faces, their people had seen their arseholes and drawn away in disgusted laughter?” (96). Obscene language, Kakraba suggests, serves as Armah’s “therapeutic shock, [meant to] awaken a very decadent and dying society” (2011, 312). I would also suggest, however, that the psychic effects of degrading material conditions, obscene inequality, and historical betrayal can only be narrativised, for Armah, through a similar harshness in style. The graphic imagery and the sense of contempt in the above passage positions the masses as empowered in their ridicule, able to see through the deceit practised by the elite. In fact, the Ghanaian people have encountered such deceit before, because national time in *Beautiful Ones* flows in circles, or indeed repeats itself without generating any real change.

The two temporalities at work in Armah’s novel do not easily map onto distinct parallel lines (modern-versus-organic or Ghanaian-versus-African, for instance) so much as onto a circle. Circularity in the postcolonial nation-state, as Achille Mbembe points out, sustains a certain ceremonial rituality that is necessary to maintain the appearance of autonomous power, concealing its actual neocoloniality: “consider, for example, ceremonies for the ‘transfer of office’ that punctuate postcolonial bureaucratic time and profoundly affect the imagination of individuals – elites and masses alike”

(Mbembe 2001, 65). Metaphors of circularity abound in *Beautiful Ones*: the night-man's circuit, the chichidodo bird, the two bus journeys that bookend the plot. These are allegories of recurring political corruption, the long chain of bribes, and the replacing of one "fat yessir-man" with another. However, Armah is not interested in dissecting how and why the promise of liberation was diverted into cycles that maintain only the appearance of progress. Like everyone else, Nkrumah himself – the main political figure whose presence hangs over the novel – is framed as both a passive and an active agent. The protagonist thinks of the "promise [Nkrumah] had held out but which he himself consumed, utterly destroyed. Perhaps it is too cruel of us to ask that those approaching the end of the cycle should accept without fear the going and coming of life and death", he concludes (Armah 1969, 103), leaving us with a sense of the fallibility of individuals in the face of entrenched structures, as well as the fact that individuals can either perpetuate or change structures.

This question of agency, as it is examined in the unfolding narrative, suggests that the truly disabling effect of neocolonial conditions can be found in their infiltration of people's subjectivities via social rituals (such as ceremonies of nationalism), and the upkeep of the new order through participation in crony capitalism. In other words, the continuation of neocolonial conditions comes to mean ontological security, ensured through wealth and social status. Thus, acceptance of the corrupt nature of the present poses, for Armah, an even greater risk than the corruption itself; as serious as corruption may be, the acceptance of corruption has the country sleepwalking into economic dependency. A seemingly throwaway moment in the novel emphatically reminds us of this:

Only a few goods trains would be coming down, and there was nothing going up with which they could possibly collide. [...] Until the old 1:50 train started up to bring Tarkwa gold and Aboso manganese to the waiting Greek ships in the harbour, this would be a time of peace (24).

A steady stream of raw material departs, with which products will be manufactured elsewhere. Naming the precise sources of African wealth, and the Mediterranean route it will take, suggests that the destination of the goods is Europe. National independence has not changed the direction of the flow of goods from inland to coast. The protagonist, whose daily job is to keep those trains on schedule, observes these external developments in tandem with his inner feelings of contradiction.

VII

The interaction of the subjective and the material world in *Beautiful Ones* is darkly energised by the realising of these contradictions. Armah communicates this through flowing narrations of the man's interiority, which begin to critically articulate the material self he had earlier begun to establish through multi-temporality. Far from suggesting the stasis of despair, the protagonist's internally torn state signals a self-orientation not directed towards wealth and status, for he can simultaneously both hold dissatisfaction with his material reality and understand the way others embrace it. Here, for example, the protagonist asks whether his restlessness is not a sign that he refuses to accept that the promises of anti-colonialism should lead to this disappointing post-independence reality:

The promise was so beautiful. It was there. We were not deceived about that. How could such a thing turn so completely into this other thing? [...] What can a person do with things that continue unsatisfied inside? Is their stifled cry not also life? (100)

In an everyday existence that requires him to accept as natural the “nauseating” motion of a promised liberation towards its opposite, the man instead holds that what “continue[s] unsatisfied inside” is life itself: the stifled but enduring belief in the possibility of change. In a society where wealth and status are the sole criteria of success, the man is not exempt from the attraction of such things, nor is he passing detached judgement from morally higher ground. Having “loved ones” of his own, the man knows that his sense of self cannot be detached from an awareness of others.

Unlike the reclusive character of Teacher, our protagonist lives anchored within the society he sees so clearly, with a family who have fully internalised the commodification of life. His dissatisfaction is profound because he cannot shake off thoughts of what can yet be. Living daily with the struggle of resisting or acquiescing to his neocolonial society's pressures gives him clear sight of both its systemic oppressions and how these penetrate his psyche at a subjective level.

There is a nuanced difference here between this and the two conclusions critics have reached about Armah's approach to the self: that he either locates potential for change in the notion of the autonomous individual, or that he regards individuality as irrelevant. For Robert Fraser, Armah is "concerned with the salvation of the people in toto, the reformation of the public will, rather than the redemption of the private soul or mind" (1980, xii). We could certainly make this claim for Sembène's work; however, there is no example in Armah's novel of a positive example of collectivity like we find in *Xala*. In Sembène's film, the dispossessed farmers-turned-beggars manage to survive through pooling their earnings and gain greater protection from police harassment when they move throughout the city as a group of over fifteen. While the absence of such in *Beautiful Ones* does not discredit Fraser's interpretation of Armah's main concern, the easy separation he makes between "the public will" and "the private soul or mind" is something Armah very clearly does not make – indeed, much of his protagonist's agony derives from his failing to put from his mind the public decay that is all around.

Lutz more helpfully emphasises that Armah's attention to collectivity is not so much meant to contrast with a lack of interest in "the private soul", but to foreground how the appeal of acquisition stifles individual agency and distorts interpersonal relations, "shrink[ing] the sphere of human activity to the exchanges of the marketplace and, in doing so, negat[ing] any singular or autonomous human activity struggling for articulation" (2003, 103). Whilst the pursuit of neocolonial wealth in *Beautiful Ones* does indeed illustrate these facts, that it does so through the subjective experience

of the protagonist is crucial, for this choice links rather than compartmentalises the social realm and the subjective. Codes that indicate class and behaviour in neocolonial Ghana are propagated by individuals seeking self-assurance within the structures of a neocolonial or global capitalism as much as they are a result of colonial hierarchies and historical continuities, Armah emphasises.

One moment in the novel particularly captures how this internalisation of economic imperatives shapes subjectivity. The protagonist's wife, Oyo, who has assimilated the values and practices of the elite, suddenly changes her behaviour on their journey to Minister Koomson's home in the Upper Residential Area:

Travelling, even a short ride in a taxi, had a very noticeable effect on Oyo. [...] She would talk, bringing up the few rich things that had happened to her all her life, and some that had not really happened, some that had not even almost happened (165).

Oyo compulsively performs a particular identity in terms of the agreed social code of neocolonial Ghana: "that in spirit, at least, they too belong to such areas" (165). Annoyed that her husband's familiarity with the driver is undermining a rare moment of class superiority, she responds with a performance of cosmopolitanism through sudden references to (perhaps non-existent) relatives in the West. Her identity is then consolidated – the driver began "to speak to her as if he now understood her greatness". But the protagonist observes the whole exchange as "some form of disease" (166), a fake exchange that harmfully perpetuates the agreed codes of status in the neocolonial nation-state. Armah frames these false relations as both effects and reproductions of capitalism. Koomson and his wife Estella, along with Oyo in her desire to emulate Estella, all demonstrate this interpenetration. Once Oyo and our protagonist arrive at Koomson's, their visit turns into a performance of power and deference, negotiated through commodities like Estella's imported record player:

“What is that?” asked Oyo. At times she had the ability to make herself sound exactly like an admiring villager. A trick to please. [...] Estella, as if this Sunday music had really moved her soul, closed her eyes, breathing deeply (176).

The self becomes a performance constituted via the commodity, through which virtue- or wealth-signalling can take place. The man cannot bring himself to participate, but nor can he confront it outright, for he must continue living in this society if he hopes to see it changed.

This and similar moments have been read by some critics as Armah’s approval of individuals acting at a remove from their socio-economic environments. “Through this concentration on individual morality during the darkest of times,” Niemi argues, “Armah can actually imagine a way forward; it is only through the main character’s ethical actions that any light is brought into the novel” (2017, 219). Likewise, for Dunham, by “existing apart from the dominant social pursuit, [the protagonist] is able to recognise its mechanisms at work” (2012, 288). These readings place greater faith in the possibility of an autonomous subjectivity than Armah does: after all, the protagonist often reads his own “struggle to resist the allure of the gleam” in passive rather than active terms, with “impotent” a frequent self-description (Armah 1969, 54). Armah repeatedly emphasises that the protagonist is refraining from confronting the political situation; indeed, the novel dwells on whether inaction and stasis may be the next best thing when faced with the impossible odds of the way things get done in the postcolony. The work required for political, economic and social change is not that which can be carried by select individuals with moral fibre, even if they be the “everyman” of our protagonist.

When considering the man’s capacity for separateness, Armah repeatedly asks whether or not its resulting psychic and societal alienation is of any use: “Was there not something in the place and about the time that sought to make it painfully clear that

there was too much of the unnatural in any man who imagined he could escape?” (Armah 55). A capacity to remain separate from society can be a self-preserving advantage when under pressure to conform – in fact, it is precisely the protagonist’s enduring capacities for imagining alternatives that cause such inner turmoil within himself. Nonetheless, at several moments in the novel, Armah comes close to adding that it provides little else beyond the advantage of self-preservation. Always in danger of fading into inconsequentiality at the societal scale, this micro-resistance is also always imbued with the possibility of becoming perpetuated and amplified via everyday intersubjective relations. In this irresolution we find a dialectics, if we consider Fanon’s conception of “the permanent tension of his freedom, [through which] men can create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world” (1952, 206). Armah, with his often-divided protagonist, is not turning away from the values of anti-colonialism, liberation and revolution to despair. *Beautiful Ones* narrates a process that Fanon, too, saw as necessary: the way that anti-colonial struggle (whether against Europeans before constitutional independence, or against complicit native elites after independence) also entails the self-negation of the (neo)colonial status of the subject. This negation is also “a founding activity, and an extremely radical terrain” for the constitution of a new political subject (Samaddar 2009, 228).

VIII

What sets the protagonist’s moral conscience apart is therefore not so much an outright, defiant refusal of the kind Dunham and Niemi read as Armah’s championing of the importance of individual morality, but the fact that he acts responsively to the context of the everyday in which he remains immersed. Or, in the words of Fanon’s closing *cri de coeur* in *Masks*, the inner turmoil provoked by his material circumstances also make the protagonist into “a man who questions” (1952, 206). When the coup exchanges one corrupted regime for another, and the men in his office go to join the crowd outside “in the same manner they had gone out in fear to hear the farts of Party men”, the protagonist instead says:

“I know nothing about the men. Who will I be demonstrating for?”
 “Look, contrey, if you don’t want trouble, get out.”
 “If two trains collide while I’m demonstrating, will you take the responsibility?”
 “Oh,” said the organiser, “if it is the job, fine. But we won’t tolerate any Nkrumahists now” (186).

His thinking response, in the novel’s dysfunctional society where “sleepwalking” is the expectation and norm, cannot be insignificant. It does not straightforwardly translate into the individual’s separating himself from society, nor into the expression of a collective, burgeoning national consciousness – his question is too inconsequential to be the former and too unrepresentative to be the latter. Nonetheless, the protagonist refuses what Armah suggests may be the greatest of neocolonialism’s victories: an unthinking, uncritical day-to-day existence that prevents consciousness and therefore the possibility of new political subjects. In the way the man performs fealty to his job, and in the way the union man performs acceptance of our protagonist’s obviously political abstention from demonstrating as, instead, a seriousness towards the job, the native bourgeoisie’s power, as mere sign/symbol, is rendered visible. I use sign and symbol in the sense Mbembe does when seeking to define the “postcolonized subject”, which he argues may well be the ability to engage in “apparently contradictory practices [that] ratify, de facto, the status of fetish that state power so forcefully claims by right. And by that same token [it] maintain[s], even while drawing upon officialese (signs, symbols), the possibility of altering the place and time of this ratification” (2001, 129). To obey here is not so much to follow a direct order (a simple power relationship), but to appear to fulfil the contradictory expectations and demands of a corrupt power structure (thereby often ending up with ineffectual action, inaction, or resistant action not clearly punishable, for not wholly oppositional).

This retention of the right to disengagement and restlessness in an almost impossible situation is Armah’s investment in the subjective realm of interiority as informed by lived experience. It is that which evades surrender to power structures by the very mechanisms it has developed to survive it – and sometimes survive with it, in apparent conviviality. In a moment like the above, the protagonist seems to be refusing

to partake of what Mbembe calls “the common daily rituals that ratify the commandment’s own institutionalisation” (1992, 5) in order to evade what the state requires of him. However, an important emphasis must be placed on the fact that *Beautiful Ones* does not long sustain that merely evading performing loyalty to the neocolonial state is *de facto* an act of resistance. No immediate freedom or power accompanies the protagonist’s interior struggle. Indeed, being Fanon’s “man who questions” means “things continue unsatisfied inside” (Armah 100), making it perhaps the hardest way to choose to survive neocolonial power structures. It is difficult to differentiate the effects on the protagonist of this moment of covert refusal from any other occasion where he feels daily life grating away at his capacity and motivation to act; however, in this scene, we do see the novel’s conception of selfhood as that which simultaneously refuses to sever itself from the material reality that shapes it, and refuses to reconcile itself to it. The possibility of such a subjectivity rests in the fact that the protagonist’s interiority is informed by his experiential understanding of the same material reality as those within the society he views so critically. It comes about only by experiencing the same temptations and hardships, not hovering at a partial remove.

This complex sense of how subjectivities can, if they must, transform under and despite the pressures of neocolonial circumstances is finally borne out by Oyo and the man’s unspoken reconciliation at the end of the novel. In many ways more climactic than the confused and inconsequential news of the coup against Nkrumah, the couple’s passive-aggressive battle of mutual misrecognition, where each has persisted throughout in what they believed to be the only way of surviving this reality, comes to an end when they both allow their own selves to be reconstituted in recognition by the other. Upon seeing Koomson’s fall from power, Oyo understands her husband’s reasons for refusing to participate in Ghana’s post-independence kleptocracy. “Perhaps for the first time in their married life”, the man felt, “he could believe that [Oyo] was glad to have him the way he was. He returned the increasing pressure of her hand” (Armah 194). Seeing Koomson’s state, Oyo feels “tremendously disturbed” within, followed by “a deep kind of love and respect” (194) for her husband. It is indeed a disturbing experience, for she

must rearrange who does and does not deserve her respect upon confronting the exploitative and fickle power structure she has (literally and figuratively) invested in. Yet it is also liberating, for this may translate into a potentially more harmonious future: a small change in the material and social world the family move in.

IX

Beautiful Ones has been classed as part of a “literature of disillusionment” in some respects (Lazarus 1990, 18), and, considering its frequently fatalistic tone, its bitter condemnation of the native elite, and uncertain conclusion, the observation is not unfounded. But when considered via the two particular devices discussed above – Armah’s use of multiple temporality, and his narrating the protagonist’s interiority – the novel is also deserving of Abiola Irele’s description of it as showing “the new realism” of its time and place (2001, 495). The loss of the illusion that independence would bring restructuring provokes a historical search for the causes and extent of the present decay; what emerges is that subjectivities themselves are at stake, and their constitution under neocolonial conditions signal bleak repercussions for society. But this mutual interdependence is at once both precursor and parallel to the confrontation with contemporary reality that fundamentally drives *Beautiful Ones*. It illustrates how material circumstances, and their effects at a subjective level, meet at the point where the protagonist remains dissatisfied with, and internally riven by, his reality. In asserting that “the future goodness may come eventually”, but also asking “where were the things in the present which would prepare the way for it?” (Armah 188), *Beautiful Ones* leaves us with an understanding that the reconstituting of subjectivity, and the re-forming of intersubjective relations, is an indispensable task in national decolonisation. Although it is their material conditions that people must reconcile themselves to – either passively witnessing or participating in injustice – this is likewise only surmountable if one has experience of it: an epistemological privilege shaped as much by daily “thoughts of the easy slide” as by their rejection.

At the novel's end, we know where the radically new cannot come from (the corrupt elite); however, we do feel that change will eventually come; what we do not have is an indication as to what, within the cyclical at present, could possibly be preparing the way for it. What *is* indicated is that these very circumstances equip the self to politicise subjective experience. Through such a confrontation with reality, the man sustains his dissatisfaction with the so-called freedom at hand, and wrestles daily with conditions that nudge him towards participating in the neocolonial economy. There is no societal congratulation for his wrestling, but it sees Armah's protagonist through the belly of the beast – both literally (he and Koomson escape the authorities through a latrine hole) and figuratively (the protagonist neither hands Koomson over to claim a reward, nor does he accept anything in return for saving him). He is a conscious subject, which intolerable conditions turn, in the end, into a resistant one.

Beautiful Ones does not try to offer a solution to the problem neocolonial state; it does the fundamental work preceding any such political transformation, proposing that only those who daily live the social and psychic reality of neocolonial material conditions see the latter's undeniable contradictions. While both *Xala* and *Beautiful Ones* are concerned with the mass internalisation of a neocolonial capitalism that consolidated itself in West Africa after the constitutional independences in many postcolonial nation-states, they come at this problem from different angles, with corresponding differences in narrative approach and formal techniques. While Armah's novel contains the themes and motifs that much scholarship has pointed out, such as disgust and disillusionment, it is profoundly dynamic, capturing the push-pull between collusion with and resistance to the logics of neocolonialism through its "everyman" protagonist. And although Sembène's film has rightly been celebrated as a confident parody of the African comprador bourgeoisies, it is also anxious about the mass effects of the subjectivity crises of this elite class – both in terms of the material oppressions they are directly responsible for (such as El-Hadji's land theft), and the false consciousness that their habits perpetuate through their incessant consumption and their cultural aspirations to France). That said, the conflicts within Armah's protagonist, and

those that play out in the open between El-Hadji, Rama and the beggars in *Xala*, sometimes yield political consciousness. As Fanon elucidates, “only conflict and the risk it implies can make human reality, in-itself-for-itself, come true. This risk implies that I go beyond life toward an ideal which is the transformation of the subjective certainty of my own worth into a universally valid objective truth” (1952, 193). In other words, it is living within society, and therefore risking social censure and psychic malaise by choosing to daily experience its conditions, which enables that which is systemic to be made visible through the vantage point of subjective experience.

While *Beautiful Ones* and *Xala* capture the material consequences and subjective effects of an independence disappointingly continuous with colonialism, transitions from colonial to neocolonial structures could be, and were, more violent than the events in these two texts. The next chapter will explore how and why subjectivity is a key consideration within two texts that are situated within a significant subset of postcolonial film and literatures that narrate events of mass bloodshed that followed independences. The Partition of India and the Nigerian Civil War are the contexts of this violence in, respectively, the Bengali director Ritwik Ghatak’s 1960 film *The Cloud-Capped Star* and the Nigerian Igbo writer Buchi Emecheta’s 1982 novel *Destination Biafra*. In both texts, individual psychic suffering evidences a collective kind of nation-memory: one that allows this suffering to be read as material oppression.

Chapter Four

(Re-)Telling Nation-History: Violence and Subjective Experience in Ritwik Ghatak's *The Cloud-Capped Star* and Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*

The Partition of India and the Nigerian Civil War saw the structural conditions of a continuing imperialism manifest as civil conflict, mass forced migration, territorial re-configurations and sexual violence. In bringing these two historical events together, this chapter seeks to make visible how Ghatak's *The Cloud-Capped Star* (1960) and Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982) position the subjective experiences of survivors of post-independence civil violence as collectively amounting to *the* definitive histories of the respective conflicts they narrativise. The everyday (re)creation of sustenance, shelter, sanity and community out of constant and systematised scarcity in both texts develops a sustained and complex relationship between subjectivity and collective resistance in the face of violence perpetuated or enabled by their respective nation-states and neocolonial powers. This relationship does not have the same results, however. Mutual interdependency sees *Destination*'s protagonist through the conflict, but spells doom for *Star*'s protagonist; as the experience of collective resilience re-educates the former, the survival of the collective comes at the expense of the latter's own life.

Examining how Ghatak utilises setting (especially natural landscapes) and cinematic form (a realism infused with experimentation), I will trace how he represents psychic suffering as the result of intersecting material oppressions – economic, gendered and political – specific to the post-independence Indian nation-state. It thus pursues a historiography of Partition that seeks to understand, through its prioritisation of subjective experience, the impact of dispossession in intersection with existing structures of violence, like patriarchy. In *Destination*, Emecheta similarly intervenes in state-sanctioned historiographies through especial attention to gender and violence. Its

focus on the experiences of women of diverse ethnicities and classes within the gendered circumstances of the Nigerian Civil War demonstrates how subjective trauma, though often irreparable, can be recounted within a collective history of women's resistance. As such, it resists the erasure of subjective memory from civil war narratives by rendering Nigerian women's points of view the lens whereby which *all* facets of the war can be understood – even and especially its geopolitical stakes.

That nation-states create altogether or choose to perpetuate certain narratives of history at the exclusion of others in order to justify their existence is no novel argument, but Indian and Pakistani state-sanctioned historiographies of Partition consistently treat it as inseparable from independence. Partition has been framed as either as a necessary tragedy – a price that had to be paid for independence, which also conveniently allows India to posit its Muslims “as a diseased limb that had to be sacrificed for the health of the national body-politic” (Chatterji 1991, 168) — or as the painful but historic birth-pangs of a nation, and therefore “synonymous with freedom” (Kumar 2002, 21), which serves the Pakistani state's self-righteous nationalism. This has significant parallels with Nigerian state-sanctioned approaches to the historiography of its own civil war, with Raisa Simola noting that “the rather sparse official commemoration of the Nigerian Civil War has been left mainly to the military, which uses the opportunity to assure itself of its role as guarantor of national unity” (2000, 98).

Representations of both Partition and the Nigerian Civil War in literary and cinematic forms have, in addition to the totalising moves mentioned above, been fraught with anxieties about the proximity of the events narrated and the fresh memories such representations may evoke. These two factors (lack of temporal distance and continued emotive responsiveness) would supposedly kindle feelings of enmity or revenge. Therefore, in the case of the Subcontinent, censorship was employed, with the need to maintain peaceful inter-community relations was cited by Jawaharlal Nehru as early as 1948 as a reason (Daiya 2002, 221). That the “traumata resulting from the Partition are still not overcome and contain the potential for explosive conflicts in the future” (Hartnack 2012, 244) speaks to how collective memory, then and now, is something to

be managed in service of particular (re)constructions in the present.³⁶ Scholarship on fiction and memoir about the Nigerian Civil War, meanwhile, came quickly. Non-fictional accounts by Nigerians of the 1967-1970 conflict emerged as early as Elechi Amadi's 1973 memoir *Sunset in Biafra*, and literary responses as early as Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* (1975) and Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* (1976). These and similar others (Achebe 1972, 2012; Soyinka 1971, 1972) have been praised as providing the alternative to official military historiography. For Craig McLuckie, the civil war memoirs of Elechi Amadi, Wole Soyinka, and Ken Saro-Wiwa especially "challenge received notions" by "depicting the effect [the war] had in real terms: human and subjective" (2001, 21), while for Ogaga Okuyade, poetry about the war is to be lauded for "remaining focused on the widening circles of pain radiating from loss" rather than macro discourses (2012, 28). In these examples and more, choosing to depict the subjective experience of war as it was felt by civilians becomes all the more political in itself due to their proximity to the events narrated.

The comparatively belated public discourse on Partition does not necessarily mean state-sanctioned historiographies have been accepted by South Asians: the complex factors of post-Partition migration (internally and internationally), and cultural norms around the hiding and revealing of trauma, are at play.³⁷ However, it also means there has been a degree of success to the amnesia encouraged by those historiographies of Partition that have painted the events as an aberration: a period of groundless, ahistorical communal rage, and even collective madness. This approach, as Gyanendra Pandey describes, has been equally useful for India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, as it makes [Partition] non-narratable either by labelling it "inexplicable and unhistorical, or by transforming the history of the event into a history of its causes and origins" (2001, 45). This designation of the psychic ("collective madness") as always already ahistorical, however, is contested by *The Cloud-Capped Star*. Ghatak's film is rare, for

³⁶ See also Gilmartin (2015) and Shani (2015) on how the interpretation of Partition resurfaced as a touchstone for narratives of the nation in the 2014 Indian general elections that resulted in a victory for Narendra Modi.

³⁷ The 1947 Partition Archive of oral history was launched in 2008, racing to record the memories of ageing survivors, while the Partition Museum at Amritsar opened as late as 2017.

it is a story of “life after arrival”, and it is temporally and spatially close to the event of the Partition of Bengal (1947). Through progressive formal choices and a storyline focused on the aftermath of forced migration, *Star* insists that the psychic suffering left in Partition’s wake is a part of the social structures of colonialism and capitalism. And although “Partition” in scholarship came to primarily mean the division of Punjab in 1947 – the synecdochical “site of rupture” (Harrington 2016, 2) – the creation of East Pakistan from Bengal was the formative event in Ritwik Ghatak’s life and work. The Punjab bias in scholarship does not often reflect the number of East Bengal refugees, which was 1.5 million in 1940. One report from a conference in Calcutta records the decision that “1 million would be rehabilitated in West Bengal, and 500.000 distributed to neighbouring provinces of Coonch, Bihar and Dhupdhara” (*Readex* 2019, n.p.).³⁸

Situated within the above context of a historiographical push-pull between nation-states and scholarly biases, *Star* has generally been considered subversive of Indian state-sponsored versions of Partition due to its narrative that does not endorse the nation-building project (Raychaudhuri 2009). That Ghatak's work challenges many narratives around the nation-building project by depicting the social injustices that national birth either exacerbated or failed to address is important, but it is also perhaps the most studied aspect of his work. Ghatak’s biography, indeed, leads us to expect it; he was involved with the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association as an actor, playwright and director until 1954 – a group that produced work on the struggles of peasants and workers against colonial and internal structures of oppression.³⁹ A member of the Communist Party of India, he was deeply affected by the partition of his home region of Bengal, whilst also growing disillusioned with CPI’s British Communist Party-directed party politics. His own eventual destitute state gave forth a cinematic vision that looked prophetically beyond nationalist optimism, and towards the everyday struggle for survival in India, as exacerbated by the consequences of Partition.

³⁸ The Partition of Bengal and the later secession with the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 began to receive more consideration in comparative work on global partitions and Partition Studies in the past two decades (Feldman 1999; van Schendel 2001; Chatterji 2009, 2015; Harrington 2016).

³⁹ See also Gopal (2005).

Here, I seek to open out from the consensus on Ghatak's subversion of nationalist historiographies to a discussion of how *Star* narrativises, in particular, Partition's violent effects at the levels of the subjective and social, and how this move illustrates Ghatak's broader interest in subjectivity as that which is subject to historical causation and social experience. *Star* both challenges the psycho-social "communal madness" nationalist narrative, and asserts that to tell of individual and collective psychic sufferings is to tell of the lasting material violence of impoverishment and dispossession under colonialism. Through close attention to the film's use of landscapes and interiors as narrative and formal tools, I will examine how Ghatak establishes for his viewer that the psychic sufferings of his characters emerge from, as well as effect, their structural conditions. In this way, psychic suffering becomes a mnemonic resource for understanding the socio-economic conditions, terror, poverty, violence and injustice refugees continued to face after Partition itself, deployed in the service of raising his viewer's social consciousness (a lifelong commitment for Ghatak). Subjectivity in *Star* emerges not as shorthand for individual disposition or personal psyche, but with historical, political and social causations. These latter not only "take", to return to Fanon's words, to "inform the individual" to different degrees (1952, 56), but the same individuals have "choices" to make about this past that "takes" inside them. Ghatak's plot, characterisation, and perhaps most remarkably his formal choices reveal these formative – and in this story's case, tragic – linkages between historical event (Partition), the structural conditions that existed and continue to exist beyond that historical event (patriarchy and poverty), and subjectivity (the effects of the lived experience of these structures on people).

I

Based on a story by Shaktipada Rajguru, *The Cloud-Capped Star's* narrative of the Bengal Partition's long aftermath is concerned with the lives uprooted alongside the murders, lynchings, rapes and abductions that accompanied the 1947 migrations. Our protagonist Neeta (Supriya Choudhury), a young woman employed as a clerk, is the

sole breadwinner of her household. She; her ageing parents; her beloved older brother Shankar, a promising musician; her restless younger brother Montu, an aspiring athlete; and her vivacious younger sister Geeta were once an urban petit-bourgeois family in East Bengal. Now, they are penniless but educated refugees who live in a refugee camp in the semi-rural environs of Kolkata. Shankar (Anil Chatterjee), the elder brother, shuttles between long bouts of singing Tagore by the riverbank, dreaming of becoming a celebrated musician, and hounding Neeta for money. Younger brother Montu wants to become a professional footballer, and keeps asking Neeta for new shoes. Neeta's boyfriend, Sanat, is a cerebral graduate student who sees the disproportionate responsibility on Neeta's shoulders, but merely laments, "it shouldn't be like this, but I'm powerless!" He accepts the funds Neeta produces for his research expenses. Neeta's ageing father and one-time schoolteacher, Taran "Master", is unable to find work and later has an accident that leaves him wheelchair-bound. He finds nostalgic recourse in the English Romantic poets. Neeta's mother is shrill and in ways stereotypical; "Anyone who has seen conventional Bengali films of the forties and fifties knows that inevitable courtyard with a long-suffering female in the middle of it," Chidananda Dasgupta quips about her in one essay (1985, 260). But Ghatak also gives us insight into how the gendered burdens of family life makes her so. Neeta's mother puts into words the impossible situation she is in, telling her daughter: "how different I've become in the last ten years, I can't bear this household's load anymore" (Ghatak 1960). Cocooned by Neeta and her mother from immediate financial hardship and domestic labour, Shankar is rewarded for his idealism, leaving for Kolkata and eventually returning a successful singer. Sanat is able to complete his studies, only to marry Neeta's sister Geeta. Shankar returns in time to take care of Neeta as she dies of tuberculosis. Succumbing to "consumption", as it was then known, Neeta is consumed by her family in their desperation to escape the economic circumstances of post-Partition refugedom.

While Ghatak's politics and personal experiences made him suspicious of state-sanctioned versions of his country's past, place is of fundamental importance in *Star*. It provides one line of approach to the film's aforementioned triangulation of historical events, broader structural conditions, and subjectivities. Unlike Emecheta, who as Chidi

Amuta (1998) and Ann Marie Adams (2001) have argued was invested in the idea that unified nationhood was at the time Nigeria's best chance against "the neocolonial ploys of the British and the separatist drives of Nigerian males" (Adams 288), Ghatak's own interviews support the idea that "if there is a strand uniting his diverse cinematic output, it is [a] strong current of anti-nationalism" (Raychaudhuri 2009, 469). *Star's* natural landscapes work at the level of both narrative and form to simultaneously express psychic disorientation (the characters' loss of their home environment) and socio-economic dispossession (impoverished and de-classed by migration). The film's opening scene, featuring the solitary figure of Neeta as she walks to work, begins to establish that land and its loss metaphorically and physically looms over the story. Ghatak's extreme wide shots are remarkable in how much of the land and how little of the characters they frame; these often feature one dominant natural element, such as a river or tree, which takes on such proportions that it becomes the subject of the shot.



Fig. 7: Landscapes of exile (Dir. Ritwik Ghatak, 1960)

The people who feature in these expansive shots are small and anonymous, invoking the question of whether this expansive landscape fosters or alienates, embraces or overwhelms them into insignificance (*Fig. 7*). This removes the land in a sense from the daily economic woes of the over-burdened characters, making it seem immutable or sacred: an almost mythological source for succour and inspiration, as in Shankar's music. Yet it is also a constant reminder of the characters' enforced physical distance to another land elsewhere. While *Star's* use of natural landscapes lends an expansive vision of "the land" as that which *is* and *goes on* (perhaps pointedly beyond and broader than "nation"), the landscape as a temporary solace makes no difference to the family's

material hardship. This duality, wherein the land of arrival as a refuge exists in tension with the land of arrival as alienating, translates the psychic dissonance that accompanies Ghatak's refugees' material conditions. People's sense of their home territory consists not merely of rivers, trees, buildings and streets; it encompasses their ancestry, social norms, moral codes, social interactions, local economies, and community practices. These points of reference, belonging to lives lived elsewhere, are painfully absent in the silent grandeur of their present surroundings. Both are Bengal, and yet this "crumbling... divided Bengal" (Ghatak 2000, 49), artificially riven, alienates its own.

Landscapes in *Star* also provoke nostalgia in the characters for their middle-class life before Partition, when the landscape may have evoked artistic sensibility rather than the weight of their current destitution. Jisha Menon points out that various sound effects "rupture the sense of utopic nostalgia set up within the diegetic frame" (2012, 64), but the visuals that Ghatak's frame includes themselves also rupture nostalgia, generating contradictions towards a critique of the latter.



Fig. 8: Taran's nostalgia (Dir. Ritwik Ghatak, 1960)

In an early scene, their father Taran (Bijon Bhattacharya) exclaims to Neeta and Shankar as they walk through a rice paddy that "To perceive this crop field's beauty costs no money!" The paddy looks excessively flooded, possibly ruined by too much rainfall. The shot includes the figure of a farmer in the background, inspecting what may be his crops (*Fig. 8*). Taran sees in the landscape an atemporality that suggests an anti-modern and anti-capitalist view of the field's value, but his longings are to be understood as effects reproduced by poverty and dispossession. As the imbalanced framing of Ghatak's shot suggests, this is Taran's attempt at coming to terms with the

loss of his schoolmaster job as a vital class indicator in his life. His pronouncements are an attempt to re-embodiment his middle class subjectivity, reaching for what once assured Taran of his place in the world, such as aesthetic appreciation. The class signalling, meanwhile, in Taran's use of Keats to express his appreciation – “Didn't Keats have a verse, ‘the poetry of the earth is never dead?’” he asks triumphantly – is out of place in this landscape.

Ghatak takes seriously the loss of the formative intellectual and artistic pursuits of the family, but including a farmer surveying his drowned crops (*Fig. 8*) here makes the literal and metaphorical backdrop to Taran's escapism one of actual struggle for sheer survival. Although rural depopulation in West Bengal slowed in the 1970s as large urban manufacturing failed to take off, the late '50s, during which *Star* was shot, was seeing a boom in low-productivity small manufacturing activities in and around Kolkata because the wages of agriculture were rarely market clearing (Bagchi 1998, 2035). This particular kind of relation between landscape and interiority is therefore suspect; Taran's recourse to the English Romantic literary tradition both overlooks the desperation in West Bengal, and depoliticises his own subjective sufferings. But unlike Ghatak's third film *The Runaway* (1959), which features a tyrannical schoolmaster, Taran often appears more helpless than his children. The scene suggests sympathy for the psychic disorientation of sudden poverty, but paints Taran's response to it as a futile, because apolitical, attempt at reassuring his subjectivity.

Shankar's dependence on the natural world for musical inspiration, in contrast, gestures to a relationship to place that serves the possibility of resistance, because it enables resilience. The landscapes that backdrop Shankar's ragas strike a harmonious note with his aesthetic pursuits, differentiating Shankar's musicality from his father's class denial. That is not to say there is no classed and gendered element to Shankar's own views about his talent: indeed, he tells Neeta it would be “unseemly for an artiste” like himself to find a job. Although *bhadralok* himself, Ghatak had little admiration for his class, and his films (especially the 1962 *Subarnarekha*) often “expose the arrogance

of [bhadralok] casteism” (Asokan 2020, 2).⁴⁰ But Ghatak’s typical ability to allow complexity without relativising the sources of social injustice is also illustrated in scenes where we see that Shankar’s musicality, however “unproductive”, is also a source of resilience for himself and Neeta. Performed either in open landscapes or indoors in dim light, Shankar’s music is never cinematically rushed; the film’s pace slows instead, editing becomes minimal, and single light sources draw attention towards the performer.



Fig. 9: Shankar’s solace (Dir. Ritwik Ghatak, 1960)

Moments that showcase his genuine skill with the sitar are powerfully composed and lit. These scenes yield the setting itself to the melody, minimising environmental distractions by utilising wide aperture to isolate Shankar against a dramatically out-of-focus background (*Fig. 9*). They present the otherwise immature character as a commanding presence, moved by and moving others through his music. Interestingly, his art also gives Shankar a certain resilience towards the gendered effects of their conditions; when asked if it “hurts his male pride” to be poor, he simply says, “No, I have something far bigger – my music”. Ghatak unequivocally paints Neeta the real victim of gendered oppression in *Star*, but he also takes seriously that creativity is a valuable – though not in itself enough – source of resilience against the systemic violences of Partition refugeedom.

This makes apparent a particular relation between material conditions and subjectivity that is not passive and unidirectional – in other words, it does not

⁴⁰ Bengali for the new class of “gentlefolk” who arose during British rule in India in Bengal.

straightforwardly translate to a situation where oppressive material conditions result in their internalisation at a subjective level. Shankar frustrates his family with his naïveté, but through his method of survival, he resists the utterly de-subjectifying effects of dispossession. This will become important in *Destination* as well, wherein Biafran women harness material and psycho-social resources – available to them through a genealogy of West African women’s resistance knowledges – for survival. There, Emecheta's female characters challenge, negotiate, refuse and adapt, in order to manage the effects of the civil war’s various forms of violence. Just as this proves transformative for Emecheta’s elite protagonist Debbie Ogedemgbe, Ratik Asokan’s notes that Ghatak too thus unsettles his “cliché Indian types — spoiled son, vicious mother-in-law, long-suffering daughter” (2020, 4). His treatment of Shankar suggests Ghatak does so to similar ends: "subjecting his characters to a series of moral and intellectual challenges” (Asokan 4), he points to their sources of resilience in their own *emplaced* heritage (Tagore’s music). Ghatak considers inseparable from the material suffering Partition caused the cost it had on people’s ability to use their imaginations and their capacities for creativity, by taking away their bodily emplacement in the lands where their cultural reference points originate.

Even though *Star*’s landscapes thus establish certain links between material conditions and the subjectivities of its characters, its treatment of the natural world is not romantic. This is a frequent refrain in scholarship that highlights Tagore’s pastoral romanticism as the primary influence on Ghatak’s cinema (Menon 2012; Raychaudhuri 2009). Partha Chatterjee offers a more convincing argument, proposing that, “seen from a larger perspective, [Ghatak’s films] are about the arbitrariness of political destiny in the twentieth century where people are forced to become citizens of new, hitherto unknown countries, build lives for themselves and rely on past memories for spiritual sustenance” (2012, 50). It is in the service of these social concerns that Ghatak deploys the Tagorean pastoral, a mode – along with the literary, musical and mythic – that generates the “abiding psychological resonance” (Chatterjee 50) of his social stories. Ghatak’s commitment to Bengali peasant and folk cultural forms date back to his IPTA

days.⁴¹ Familiar with group-theatre practices, the benefits of many “layers of experience” (Chatterjee 50), in terms of intelligibility and effect on diverse audiences, would not have been lost on him. Although some romanticism communicates post-Partition loss and longing, Ghatak inserts narrative and formal elements into his landscapes that also speak to the socio-economic reality of post-Partition Bengal.



Fig. 10: The trains of Partition (Dir. Ritwik Ghatak, 1960)

For example, a recurring train that interrupts the aural and narrative continuity of several moments of character interaction situates this landscape historically (*Fig. 10*). The sound of the train overwhelms dialogue and forces the actors (and likely the crew) to pause and wait for it to pass. Ghatak incorporates this uncontrollable environmental factor into his scenes as though it is a diegetic element. With all of the connotations of migration and violence trains carry in Partition historiography (Kaur 2011), this situates the landscape from which Shankar draws inspiration for his ragas inside historical events, even as his mental romanticisation of that landscape helps Shankar survive his conditions.

The background passing of trains also configure their “arrival” land as a place where resources pass through but never stop. Kolkata determines the spatial and economic contours of its semi-periphery, and their refugee settlement as a place oriented towards that which it never benefits from: urban industrialisation. For instance, Neeta and Shankar’s younger brother Montu drops out of his studies to accept a low-skilled manufacturing job, arguing “those jobs have better prospects nowadays, anyway”, and

⁴¹ See also Manishita Dass on Ghatak’s keen interest in the “epic form” of the indigenous folk traditions of performance like the *jatra* (2017, 83).

spelling the end of their father's dream of middle class jobs for his children. Although West Bengal experienced a slower rate of urbanisation relative to the rest of India in the post-independence decade, one important feature of it was its high degree of spatial concentration (Bagchi 1998; 3033). Changes in the proportion of the urban to the rural workforce had very tangible spatial consequences. Sayandeb Chowdhury notes the "momentous visuality of dispossession" that was around Ghatak in the 1950s "as Calcutta was seething with the dislocated" (2015, 260). But at odds with Chowdhury's conclusion that "it was only a matter of time before the city would inevitably become the locus of [Ghatak's] scopic drive" (260), the city in *Star* is not so much the locus but the unseen entity dictating life around and near it. Kolkata keeps Neeta's family living as satellites to its economic activity, marking their lives with the people it claims (Montu, later Shankar). Ghatak thus treats the landscape of West Bengal with a critical dualism, representing at one and the same time the economic pressures of semi-peripherality that determine the characters' lives, as well as the aesthetic qualities of landscape that sustains Shankar.

Manishita Dass terms this duality a "dynamic oscillation" that accounts for Ghatak's movement between the cinematic styles of a "humanist realism" and "affective transitions of melodrama" (2010, 244). It could be equally accurate to understand this as a layered but whole representational objective, rather than an oscillation between two distinct objectives. Ghatak's representation of the effects of Partition "on the intimate and quotidian" is a representation of "the foundational national trauma of the Indian subcontinent" (Dass 2010, 244). For him, nowhere else is this trauma most manifest, and therefore able to jolt viewers, but in the everyday experiences of its survivors. Emecheta's *Destination* showcases "oscillation" of the kind Dass ascribes to *Star*; in that Emecheta prefers a two-pronged narrative approach to telling the civil war. Utilising both an omniscient voice and partial character points-of-view, *Destination* retells all aspects of the war – from the geopolitical to the domestic – from the perspectives of women (I will later discuss how switching between these two lenses allows Emecheta to contextualise her characters' experiences of the war within the wider framework of shifting neocolonial and national interests). However, Ghatak historicises his landscapes

in the service of his social critique. To this end, he makes room for the pastoral-romantic and the musical to communicate character interiority; these are never divorced from the socio-economic specificities of the post-Partition landscape, because they, too, are historical phenomena rooted in the social geographies and cultural practices of Bengal. They are a part of the material losses brought about by the seismic changes the region underwent in the period (the 1943 Bengal Famine, the 1946 Calcutta “riots”, the Partition migrations of 1947-9). *Star’s* use of landscape is a skilfully deployed spatialisation, wherein the relations of power that dictate its characters’ lives are inscribed onto “the apparently innocent spatiality of socio-economic life” (Chowdhury 2015, 256), and represented to us in a social critique that centres how these relations impact upon subjectivities.

II

Ghatak’s expressionistic interiors are companions to this use of landscape, developing an impression of the interpersonal terror effects of their forced migration, and how it combines with the slow economic violence of refugeedom. Robert Young describes how the terror effects of violence “spread into the violence of relationships, of people sealed within themselves [...] Terror has [then] ... leaked into unreadable forms of arbitrary violence beyond the realm of all political and social institutions of power: in short, into trauma” (2013, 324). Violence goes from that which is *visited upon* subjects by the state, to that which is re-created *amongst* subjects (in their interpersonal relationships) and *within* subjects (to themselves). It was almost impossible for any migrants from Bengal but the most well-off to reconstruct new lives across the border with little struggle. Middle-class and working-class refugees spent several years in refugee camps, and most could not take up their past occupations (Raychaudhury 2004, 5653). The vast majority of refugee families like Neeta’s – even if not directly victim to Partition’s physical violence – were consigned to a slow economic death. In excess to the body-politic, Neeta and her family are the collateral damage of a nation-making that is not, and never was, for them and theirs. To suggest this entrapment, want, and a

mutual inter-personal reliance that has sustaining as well as draining effects, *Star* makes use of high contrast lighting, expressionistic angles, multiple depths-of-field (or a dull flatness), and tight angles in indoor scenes.

Particular sequences stand out in painting such psycho-economic suffocation. One is where Neeta's caregiving burden is multiplied to devastating extent upon her father's debilitating accident; in a shot that follows the moment of the doctor's diagnosis, Neeta turns away from her family and wearily looks up a dark staircase. Low light and dramatic depth-of-field renders the staircase an endless upward spiral. Evoking a sense of vertigo in the viewer, the slow pan to the vortex-like sight above Neeta is held to abstraction, and the subject of the shot is erased. Neeta's gendered duty towards family is to be weaponised further from this point on so as to extract from her wage labour.



Fig. 11 (Dir. Ritwik Ghatak, 1960)

Whereas at the start of the film we had many glimpses of her personality, from here on she grows more insular, and Ghatak's camera-work more static, as it shoots her from behind windows, metal bars, doorways, and in dim indoor light (*Fig. 11*). As Neeta is increasingly thus singled out, so are the disproportionately experienced consequences of Partition revealed. In one moment of lucidity, Neeta's father sums Ghatak's critique: "Now we are civilised, we educate the girl to wring her dry and ruin her future." This is perhaps the most pointed difference in *Star's* and *Destination's* narratives, despite their shared representational focus on gendered violence. Although Ghatak does not suggest any kind of cultural "return" is the answer – as discussed above, he treats nostalgia

critically – he cautions that the Nehruvian state’s insistence on education for Indian women is also undeniably strategic, overlapping as it does with goals around capitalist development.⁴² “If you make half of the population of a country the mere plaything of the other half, how will you ever make progress [as a nation]” Jawaharlal Nehru believed (Tagra 1994, 42), and equating the two in this way generated many setbacks for women's liberation after independence (with many turning instead to revolutionary politics).⁴³ Neither the British nor the bourgeoisie in the Indian postcolonial state had any real appetite to challenge caste, let alone patriarchy. As the communist theorist and politician E.M.S. Namboodiripad writes, this resulted in capitalism’s flexible and fatal amalgamation with both: “In India, many of the forms of exploitation of the pre-capitalist systems are continuing, some in the original and some in changed forms. There exists along with these a new system of exploitation as a result of capitalist development” (Prashad 2019, 89). Wage labour, itself exploitative, exploits Neeta further in a double-bind, as honouring the codes of filial duty becomes honouring the demands of the market.

Ghatak's work is singular in many ways, but this insistence on the gendered dimensions of both material oppression and subjective suffering especially challenges received notions of what kind of narrative preoccupations male and female authors of Partition-related stories have. These anxieties surface within scholarship on Emecheta’s *Destination*, too, because the novel affirms the meaninglessness of the categories of “masculine” or “feminine” in textual analysis. The geopolitical and military aspects of the Nigerian Civil War have frequently been pointed to as Emecheta’s novel’s so-called “masculine” sections (Machiko 2008; Okome 2017; Stratton 1994), when in fact we shall see how *Destination*’s aforementioned “oscillation” between omniscient and subjective points of view challenges such equivalences. Similarly, Ghatak’s *Star* has proven difficult for those looking to make gendered equivalences about Partition writing, such as “women writers carve a subjecthood through memory, perception, recall and dream structures” whereas “male narratives locate events at the centre of the

⁴² On Nehru and women’s empowerment, see also Tagra (1994) and Shetty (2015).

⁴³ See also Ania Loomba’s *Revolutionary Desires* (2019).

story” (Jain 2006, 1657). Precisely the former representational pursuits have been attributed to Ghatak’s film, with some designating his niche as “the idea of womanhood, both idealised and ruthlessly exploited” (Chatterjee 2012, 49). More applicable may be Jacob Levich’s observation that there is a “critique of the family-as-institution” (1997, 32) in *Star*, which lays bare how “love and loyalty are conditioned by financial necessity” (32).

These coinciding circumstances are again communicated via a series of formal techniques. These sustained and repeated visual choices correspond with Neeta’s emotional registers, stripping those assumed sources of psychic sustenance – filial bonds and care – down to their gendered preconditions.



Fig. 12: Domesticity that suffocates (Dir. Ritwik Ghatak, 1960)

Dissolves are frequently used to that end, the most effective of which overlays a close-up of Neeta clutching her throat in suppressed distress with their domestic courtyard (Fig. 12). Feminist and subaltern historiographies have attended to the gendered dimensions of anti-colonial nationalist discourses in India at the time of Partition (Daiya 1998; Menon and Bhasin 1998), although their focus on its sexual violence has tended to take precedence over the poverty left in its wake. The former has been urgent and valuable work, but I am here seeking to also draw attention to the continuation of gendered violence in terms of economic oppression, and its asymmetrical psychological effects, on women Partition refugees. Neeta’s tragic fate is in this sense never an abstraction that seeks to comment on “womanhood” as an archetype; it cannot be separated from the film’s understanding of familial bonds as economic bonds. Any

reassurance familial bonds may present in the face of displacement and loss, *Star* illustrates, is contingent upon material conditions, and on the always-already gendered nature of these conditions.

Form, as these observations evidence, pulls our focus onto how Partition-induced poverty has compounded its disproportionately gendered experience. Several critics, however, have been quick to narrow *Star*'s formal choices to a question of cultural influence: are Ghatak's so-called "melodramatic" touches "Indian" (a nod to the Bengali *jatra*) or "Western" (a nod to Brecht)? This delimiting bespeaks a politics of its own, of course. Amongst Marxists proponents of a radically anti-capitalist cinema, the form/content distinction remains a recurring debate, with a kind of balance struck between the two in instances where form effectively becomes content (Fairfax 2019). Actors and directors such as Utpal Dutt, Bijon Bhat Ghosh and other members of the progressive film societies that functioned during the decades after independence "struggled with the question of form as part of their questioning of what constituted a 'good' cinema" (Majumdar 2012, 732). Ghatak's attempts to push formal categories cannot be separated from the work's political subject matter. He frequently expressed that his art foremost sought to "awaken the Bengalis to an awareness of their state and a concern for their past and future" (2000, 49). This neither calls for reading *Star* in isolation for its form, which results in an incomplete analysis like Bonnie Fan's (2015), nor for fixating on Ghatak's anti-realist elements as obstacles to his social critique, as Chidananda Dasgupta does when he points out several of *Star*'s elements, like aural discontinuities, "ignore the needs of realism" (2012, 260).⁴⁴ In fact, when we read the film's form in light of Ghatak's content – that of the mutually consequential, and indeed cyclical, violence of the psychic and economic afterlives of Partition – we see that those elements that have received the broad-brush label of "melodramatic" do much of the work in establishing the characters' psychic states, to further Ghatak's political and social critique.

⁴⁴ It is worth bearing in mind that the film's "aural discontinuities" may well not be conscious formal choices, but down to the limited technical control available to Ghatak in semi-rural outdoor conditions with second-hand microphones and 18mm film.

In her convincing discussion of the director's views on form, Moira Weigel configures this experimentation as "Ghatak [theorising] his own style, which remained intentionally and insistently hybrid," (2018, 140). Indeed, what others have deemed his melodrama, Ghatak has called his "epic mode" for "deal[ing] a straight knockout blow to the nose" (Ghatak 2000, 34) – that is, for communicating his social critique in a stylistic register of maximum effectiveness for his community. This suggests the direction of influence may actually be the opposite. He looked to Europe and found practices familiar to India, practices which Western audiences had to be "built up" to, in terms of mental and cultural preparedness: "Remember always that Brecht had to build up this 'epic' attitude in the minds of men through his Alienation effect. In our community, this epic attitude is still a living tradition," he argued (2000, 21-22). Here, even as "Ghatak implicitly challenges the cultural imperialism of the West, implying that critical melodrama belongs as much to Bengali folk tradition as to Brecht," (Weigel 140), he also refuses to authorise a cultural mode historically present in South Asia (and therefore which preceded Brecht) through reference to Europe as a formative influence. Instead, he gestures to Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* as a close equivalent to what he does, while emphasising where his practice differs from what Brecht had to do (he had to "build up" his audience to an "epic attitude"). Deploying forms drawn from his own "living tradition", Ghatak expresses that he did not need to "build up" *his* audience, who understand his experimental realism.

There are also underlying Eurocentric assumptions at work – still prevalent in a Film Studies that condenses vastly different works under "World Cinema" as a marketable category – that do not allow "melodrama" to be a value-free stylistic observation. Ghatak's comparative lack of success in the West vis-à-vis Satyajit Ray, for instance, is not unrelated to persisting Western distaste towards, or fetishisation of, what it designates as "Indian" aesthetics and tastes (exuberance, dynamism, "colour", exaggeratedness and general sensory overload). This rests on what Keya Ganguly identifies as "a dissimulation by means of which 'far from the centre' implies 'further back in time'" (2018, 212). It manifests in readings of Ghatak's cinematic form through

(spoken or unspoken) expectations around what an “Indian realism” should be – in other words, how much experimentation it is allowed before it formally “fits” European expressionism or melodrama instead. In Ghatak’s case, to read form is not to read it *over* content; the former facilitates the examination of a material facet of the oppressive structures his social art sought to tackle. In a 1967 interview, Ghatak almost pre-empts the Third Cinema manifesto (Solanas and Getino 1969) when he declares “I am going to keep on alienating you in order to draw your gaze to that truth. I would succeed as an artist only if you become aware and get involved in the task of challenging that social obstacle or injustice in the world outside after seeing the film” (Ghatak in Dass 2012, 84). As such, not only does jarring with diegetic conventions communicate in the register of the psychic experience of the suffering characters, these techniques also mark Ghatak’s search for a realist cinematic idiom to “reach out to people” (Devi and Bhattacharjee 2016) and effect their interiorities. As such, *Star*’s realism is experimental and polytonal in the service of Ghatak’s materialist understanding of psychic suffering as, in this case, gendered – and, as always, historicisable.

III

At the end of the film we see Shankar visit a dying Neeta in a sanatorium in the mountains. As he tries to cheer her up with small talk, Neeta interrupts: “But I really wanted to live!” Some have read this ending as Ghatak’s rejection of national(ist) narratives, in that Neeta acquires power in her marginality, unmasking the totalising nature of Partition historiography and its erasure of spectral (i.e. refugee) bodies. Raychaudhuri offers that “this very alienation provides the space from which they can begin to resist” (480). This reading requires cautioning against, as it is difficult to find within *Star* itself. The marginalisation Ghatak depicts, and the injustice of Neeta’s death, is never figured as some form of resistance. There are unmistakable positions of agency for some of Emecheta’s female war refugees, which this chapter will go on to discuss; however, they ultimately draw on a set of historical and contextual factors that are absent in *Star*’s world. Partition refugees were not marginal by choice, but by the

imperialist, nationalist, and gendered forces of a capitalism in transition. Recent trends in scholarship have aimed at restoring to subordinate social groups their subjecthood in the making of history, but as Sugata Bose points out, a resulting “over-emphasis on the everyday processes of contest and compromise might obfuscate the reality of social dominance and leave a less than accurate impression of the 'active' agency of labour resistance” (2008, 140). Marginalisation is the position from which resistance has to come, for it is the margins those like Neeta’s family now inhabit – but the “weapons of the weak” were rarely able to defend more than minimally defined norms and needs within an acutely unequal social context like Partition’s aftermath (Bose 2008, 140). It is not the *situation* of marginality that is fertile ground for resistance in *Star* (as Raychaudhuri seems to imply), but perhaps the possibility of working outwards from subjective suffering, towards consciousness of the material forces behind it.

The tragedy of Partition, for Ghatak, can only be accommodated by a strategy of representation that draws on individual psychic experiences of suffering as they exist in relation to the material aftermath of mass violent displacement. This task — of representing a cataclysmic event in history as the psycho-social process of oppression it also was — finds expression in his experimental realism and committed social content. Gyanendra Pandey suggests that we conceive of Partition as threefold: the first being the Muslim League's insistence upon the establishment of Pakistan, beginning in 1940 and continuing to the Partition; the second being the actual splitting up of the Muslim-majority provinces; and the third and most important the hundreds of thousands slaughtered, raped and displaced (2001, n.p.). The intent of this is to open official Partition historiography to the experience of those who actually lived through its entire trajectory. To these three distinctions Ghatak’s *Star* adds a fourth that is equally consequential: the experience of those who lived with Partition’s decades-long aftermath of dispossession, displacement, rural depopulation, forced urbanisation and destitution. Taking this long view, Ghatak’s film treats subjectivity as an important depository of historical experience that not only interrogates the triumphalism of nation-statehood but brings subjectivity to bear onto the narrating of history. This treatment makes the psychic legacies of Partition visible (trauma, longing, resilience) *within* the

material legacies of Partition (displacement, poverty, injustice) as it searches for historical truths.

IV

Centring as it does the lives of women during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), Buchi Emecheta's 1982 novel *Destination Biafra* is interested in how such gendered processes as discussed above may be contextualised within the broader workings of neocolonialism. It arrives at a markedly more hopeful conclusion than Ghatak, despite their similar mobilisations of content and form in the service of representing the interwovenness of material and psychic violence. Whereas Neeta is destroyed by the intersecting pressure of patriarchy, capitalism, religion and Partition dispossession, *Destination's* women survive. It is not without cost, but Emecheta points to the effectiveness of certain collective and subjective practices of resilience amongst West African women, which includes remembering genealogies of resistance to injustice, whether colonial or homegrown.

In a speech delivered at the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Emecheta draws attention to African women's abilities in making their material conditions work for the psychic and social wellbeing of themselves and their communities: "Working and achieving to great heights is nothing new to the woman of Africa. [...] This does not mean that she becomes a successful international lawyer, a writer or a doctor, although African women in these professions are doing very well. But for the majority of African women, her real achievement — as I see it — is to make her immediate environment as happy as is possible under the circumstances" (1988, 179). This she configures as more than care-taking, framing it with an example of West African women's historic resistance to colonialism, the "Women's War" in Aba (1929-30). Turning oppressive circumstances into environments of individual and collective wellbeing is, Emecheta proposes, nothing short of evidence that African women daily pass the ultimate test of resilience and achievement. This power is passed on, practiced

and known (“nothing new”), and creates immediate, material changes that challenge “the circumstances” (179).

In her novel *Destination Biafra*, this everyday (re)creation of sustenance, sanity and community out of systematised scarcity is represented through a sustained and complex relationship between subjective wellbeing and collective resilience in the midst of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70). While *Star* is the only film to have brought Ghatak some measure of financial success and international reputation, Emecheta’s *Destination* is rarely afforded as lengthy a stand-alone analysis as her *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) or *Second-Class Citizen* (1974). Yet this novel is singular for the ways in which it seeks to gender war historiography. Examining Emecheta’s use of both an omniscient voice and partial character points-of-view, I will contend that this undertaking must be read beyond the idea of an addendum to existing literary responses to the Nigerian Civil War through the provision of a missing “female perspective” – a term, as Polo B. Moji has noted (2014), found in much Emecheta scholarship (Okuyade, 2010; Nwahunanya, 1991; Nnaemeka, 1997; Hodges, 2009) without satisfactory definition. In calling Emecheta’s centring of women’s subjective war experiences a historiographical intervention, I seek to move beyond the surface observation that *Destination* counters masculinist historiographies of the Civil War by virtue of its author’s gender or by narrating the story from the perspectives of female characters, and out towards the broader radical intervention Emecheta is making about who we turn to for narrating what components of history.

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay describes how, “sealing certain deeds and actions in the past, imperial power secludes people, modes of life, and forms of action from themselves” (2019, 585), referring to what imperialism not only destroys but disavows having destroyed by stamping that which it destroyed as always-already ineffectual, primitive, or dying. In bringing the “modes of life and forms of action” available to African women from their foremothers to a story about a neocolonial war renders *Destination*’s intervention not so much the presentation of “a female perspective” (Machiko 2008, 61), I propose, but an account of several women and their actions that

stem from knowledges that cannot be made “past” because they remain effective means of agency and resilience in the present. As Elleke Boehmer argues, “in order to raise female subjects into twentieth-century Igbo history, Emecheta extracts a lexis of significant metaphors or defining images from those subjects’ lives – images which in each case arise specifically from their day-to-day reality” (2005, 115). This gives due consideration to the fact that the symbolic is not outside of the contexts within *Destination*’s women experience their quotidian realities. As such, Emecheta situates women’s subjective experiences of the war (here represented especially through testimony and point-of-view narration) as sources from which those geopolitical dimensions of the war, customarily thought of as objective facts, can be understood. In doing so, Emecheta’s novel treats the structural workings of neocolonialism and petrocapiatalism in wartime Nigeria as *known* to West African women – and met by them via practices that “make [their] immediate environment[s]” (Emecheta 1988, 179) survivable.

Destination takes on two representational tasks for the above ends. One contextualises the war within its wider geopolitical stakes (confirming especially its neocolonial character) through a mixture of dialogue between female characters with limited or localised knowledge, while delivering general information in third-person omniscient narration that takes the reader chronologically through events in Nigeria and London. The former device prioritises the observations of West African women experiencing the conflict simultaneously to their situating the war as neocolonial in character, drawing from their subjective observations. The latter reveals to the reader pre- and intra-war political and economic developments, which confirm the predictions and interpretations offered by the novel’s women before and after the fact. I will first examine this interplay through moments in the novel where omniscient third-person narration is deployed to illustrate the neocolonial resource scramble that undergirds the civil war, and where female characters demonstrate their existing knowledge of this based on their own lived experiences.

The novel's other representational pursuit is that of affirming West African women's creative coping abilities and maternal genealogies of resistance, wherein "alternative terms of political affiliation" (Boehmer 15) with and beyond nationhood can be discerned. Sexual violence, refugeedom, the loss of children, the destruction of crops: all such war atrocities in the novel target things that reassure the very subjectivities of Emecheta's women, who are often at one and the same time producers, workers, carers, mothers, sisters, cultivators, traders, healers, teachers and sexual assault survivors. Considering those scenes where women bear witness, negotiate safety and call upon the authority of the maternal (including but beyond biological motherhood) for self-defence, I will trace how women's resilience in *Destination* is understood as both organised resistance where possible, and as the collectivisation of the psychic burdens of war always. This not only means a bulwark against the desubjectifying effects of the above atrocities, but also (as the protagonist sets out to do in the end) the telling of the civil war *in toto*, out of their lived experiences.

V

Destination's exposé of foreign involvement in the Civil War situates the geopolitics behind the conflict within the wider framework of the clash of neocolonial interests in West Africa. As the novel recounts the war's many political and military manoeuvres in omniscient third-person, its linear but diachronic timeline also follows Debbie Ogedemgbe's journey from Lagos to the East. She is disguised as one of thousands of Igbo refugees heading in the same direction (on a doomed mission to broker peace with Biafra's Colonel Chijioke Abosi). To present the Civil War as neocolonial in character, *Destination* begins by establishing that independence was nominal by dramatising the motivations shaping Britain's exit. The opening scene is particularly demonstrative here: a conversation between the last British Governor-General of Nigeria; an older statesman, Sir Fergus; and his officer son, Alan Grey. Emecheta shows two related imperialist attitudes as driving British strategy around Nigerian independence. Sir Fergus deploys the discourse of eugenics to equate Africans

with children: “These people haven’t even been given that paper yet and they behave as if they already own the whole world” (Emecheta, 1982 7).⁴⁵ For the younger Alan, who echoes this infantilisation but is altogether uninterested in whether Nigerians are deferential enough to the British colonial old guard, the issue at hand is tapping the Hausa’s mineral wealth and the Igbo’s oil: “Now we are to hand it over to these people, who’ve had all these minerals since Adam and not known what to do with them” he complains (8).

The novel then adds contextual information and subjective impressions from Nigerian women who confirm extractive petrocapiatalism as the key determinant of post-independence politics and economics, prior to any talk of war. In turning for geopolitical information to women who are absent from the decision-making itself but subject to the lived effects of these decisions, Emecheta chooses a theme also present in the work of her contemporaries – evidencing the neocolonial character of the civil war – but gets the reader to think about *where* they expect to find this evidence, and the potentially gendered nature of that expectation. This is made possible by the novel’s switching between third-person omniscient narrator, which gives the reader access to all spaces, and the points-of-view of several women including the protagonist Debbie, the daughter of the inaugural finance minister who is later assassinated in the 1966 coup, and Elina Eze, wife to Dr. Eze, the deputy of the Igbo NCNC party candidate Dr. Ozimba.

Via the former approach, Emecheta first communicates the stakes of the capitalist world-system in a one and entire Nigeria, which must continue functioning as a petrocolony in neocolonial West Africa (Uche, 2008; Korieh 2012). This stake is then confirmed as known by Nigerian women, as *Destination* prioritises women's interpretations of where the war sits within this geopolitical and historic set-up. Debbie, for instance, situates Nigeria's “resource curse” within the problem of postcolonial leadership, drawing attention to the economic bind that means any new leader will have

⁴⁵ See also Saini (2019) on the race pseudoscience widely subscribed to in the UK in the decades prior to and during *Destination*’s setting.

to trade with the ex-coloniser: “I don’t think Abosi’s move [secession] is as stupid as it looks. You know what Momoh did — he divided the country into twelve. Not only that, he made sure that through the way it was divided that the richest oil wells in the East fall into the hands of the non-Igbo-speaking people. In other words, he declared war” (115). This devolution of power away from “Igbo-speaking-people” in particular nods to the highly politicised question of ethnicity after colonial rule, wherein the dominance of the Igbo as the majority ethnic group in East and South East Nigeria functioned also to the detriment of minority ethnicities.⁴⁶ During the harrowing lorry journey East that Debbie undertakes with a group of Igbo refugees, one “bold old woman who because of her age and fearlessness was becoming their leader” (177), Mrs. Maduko, demonstrates a consciousness of the nature of the Civil War that provides a clear analysis of the economic incentives behind the conflict. When Debbie naïvely suggests Abosi will surrender rather than let Biafrans starve, Mrs. Maduko responds: “You don’t know our people. Do you think those at the top will starve? No, they are probably there drinking champagne. And as for the businessmen, they don’t want this war to end. You see that driver who brought us to the Benin-Agbor road? Well, he used to be an ordinary poor lorry driver, now he’s a very wealthy man” (181). She reminds Debbie that war is not only *incidentally* profitable for some but that decision-making men may have escalated events precisely for its lucrative results in several sectors of the economy. Go up the corridors of power far enough, she further infers, and one may find no sign of the devastation on the ground. Several characters echo Mrs. Maduko’s knowledge in different ways. Debbie’s friend Barbara observes how this war will fuel the global economy: “The woman and children who would be killed by bombs and guns would simply be statistics, war casualties. But for the soldier-politicians, the traders in arms, who only think of their personal gain, it would be the chance of a lifetime. And the politicians who started it all can pay their way to Europe or America and wait until it has all blown over,” she predicts (114). Rarely openly stated by the male characters, the issue of control over natural resources – a key driver of the war – is configured as a

⁴⁶ See also Ahmad (2015) on minorities and Nigerian policies, and Nwangwu et. al. (2020) for a study of post-war Igbo nationalism.

known given for African women who have already been managing the pressures wrought by the same economic model.

With its half Itsekiri, half Igbo protagonist in Debbie, the novel's hopes for one multi-ethnic nation is clear, but "Emecheta [also] realises that foreign and unmodified forms of government, when imposed on a colonised nation, will necessarily serve in the interests of colonial powers" (Adams 291). This is not only evidenced by the above moments that show Nigerian independence never meant economic autonomy, but also by illustrating how and why Nigerian leaders fail to take this seriously. Male leadership at the personal levels of competence and consciousness is held up to scrutiny, iterating the fatal combination of persisting colonial legacies that are beyond the control of any one man. It would be disingenuous to read these details as Emecheta suggesting mere personal rivalries escalated into Civil War; it rather cements how the ongoing material effects of colonialism continue to determine the nation-state's post-independence political trajectory, as well as the limits of what its native leaders have the economic and political power to execute. From the character of Saka Momoh, the leader of the Nigerian forces who is "hysterical" (109) with rage when challenged, to Chijioke Abosi, the leader of the Biafran Army who is "a black white man" (245), male leaders in *Destination* evidence the legacy of a British colonial education system in Nigeria that invested in a certain class of colonial male subjects who could stand by the interests of the imperial metropole. Although Emecheta changed most names and included a disclaimer to *Destination* about its fictional status, their educational backgrounds match their real counterparts in Nigerian history: the ruler of Nigeria during the Civil War, General Yakubu Gowon, was Sandhurst trained; the leader of Biafra, C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, was a graduate of Lincoln College, Oxford. This education has rendered characters like Abosi "black white [men]", while exclusion from the same has others like Momoh hyper-sensitive to any real or imagined condescension. Nigerian–Biafran leadership is therefore represented as a problem of colonial education as a structure that, amongst other things, has shaped these men's subjectivities. *Destination's* critique of male leadership overlays the strategic and personal, getting to the heart of a known failure of independence – a class, in the Fanonian sense, that is "alienated" through

colonial education, and without the "national consciousness" (Fanon, 1961) that could have been forged, had this class participated in popular anti-colonial mobilisation prior to independence.

In another example, Elina Eze, the wife of the Biafran politician Dr. Eze, understands long before her husband's arrest at the end of the war that colonial structures (and their internalisation) has combined with petty score-settling: "Pity at the short-sightedness of her husband and his sex came over Elina. How could grown men make such blunders, and yet elevate themselves with such arrogance that one could not reach them to tell them the truth?" she wonders (240). As Dr. Eze later collapses in fear, surrounded by Nigerian army soldiers, "he remembers his wife's voice saying, mere hours ago, 'Was not the oil the reason for all this mess in the first place?' All women were witches — how did she know?" (241) That male leaders throughout arrive belatedly at what is either thought or said by *Destination*'s female characters also colours the tone of the omniscient third-person narration, suggesting the narrator may be Emecheta's own voice. For example, we are told that Brigadier Onyemere, one of the instigators of the first coup,

"did not know what he had let himself in for. He thought that by praising the spirit of nationalism he would abolish tribalism, blunt the sharpness of imported religion [...] His false belief that he had been successful in his broadcast to the nation was fuelled by the praise the newspapers heaped upon him" (69).

Interestingly, this tone of narration – which lists metaphysical and material colonial legacies ("imported religion", "tribalism") that no man could undo through good PR – echoes the mix of criticism and pity in Elina Eze's subjective perspective, underlining lack of foresight (Onyemere "did not know"; Dr. Eze was "shortsighted") and the blindness that accompanies self-aggrandising ("his false belief"/"such arrogance").

Subjective experience, in the form of testimony, is also treated as an authoritative historical source in *Destination*. Interiority is thus situated as a component of the material, as scenes that centre women and children's testimonies of localised

violence also depicts how the act of narration provides re-integration into community, and the experiential information provided aids in collective decision-making. Prior to the declaration of Biafran independence, for example, reports of the killings of Igbos reach Colonel Abosi through witnesses amongst whom Emecheta singles out a young mother and a teenage boy. Quoting these testimonies without interruption and in full staggers the forward thrust of the narrative with the introduction of violent imagery and fragmented sentences:

“One boy of about fifteen, who had long taken leave of his senses, rushed up to Ugoji and started to blubber, with saliva dripping from both corners of his mouth, ‘My mother, my father... we were made to watch while they pounded them like yam with their clubs’ [...] One of his brothers came and pulled him away, apologising and saying to Ugoji, ‘He has been like this since the night of the incident.’ Ugoji simply gaped” (84-5).

Delivering this information via testimony rather than third-person omniscient narrator lends it authority as Emecheta’s reader’s sole insight into the events of June through October 1966, when an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 Igbo were killed in pogroms in the north of Nigeria (Heerten and Moses 2014, 173). Another harrowing testimony, from a young woman, paints its lived experience:

“My husband was a chemist and we owned our own shop. As he was locking up, I heard the heavy footsteps of soldiers... Our neighbours heard him calling for God’s help, calling for his mother and me, but none of us could help. We all heard the firing, and I disobeyed him and ran out... I was alone in the dirty muddy street where his bullet-ridden body, still warm, was left” (91).

Details like the “body, still warm” and the “heavy footsteps” render this young survivor’s public testimony an act of narration: the bare facts of the night are brought to life via adjectives that describe the sensual experience of it. It is this latter quality that not only makes “all the women present begin to cry”, but also “stir[s] the anger of those listening to fever point” (91), galvanising group political commitment. Her testimony is thus not only factually complete but socially powerful, which for all present, confirms its truth; that is to say, the reaction of collective sorrow and anger speaks to its

relatability, and this unverifiable testimony facilitates political consensus not because its truth is confirmed by a third source but because it is confirmed as reality by others whose subjective experiences speak to the likelihood of these events.

Just as Ghatak resorts to spatialisation in order to overlay in simultaneity – rather than hierarchise – the psychic suffering of his characters and the material consequences of Partition refugeedom, it is helpful to think of this, too, in terms of spatialisation. Madhu Krishnan offers a definition of narrative spatialisation as that which “draws on multiple scales and registers of social space [and] emphasises their interconnectedness as elements of a single, asymmetrically loaded system” (2018, 12). Emecheta employs this to situate the war as a neocolonial war, a violent process of incorporating any economically vital outliers – like secessionist Biafra – into the “single, asymmetrically loaded system” (12) of capitalism in its neoimperial form. Pivoting between omniscient narration and women’s points-of-view secures the authority of their lived experiences, and the knowledges deriving from their subjective observations, by echoing or confirming them through our omniscient narrator. This spatialising move situates women where they really were throughout the war: at the war front, because the war front was everywhere in East Nigeria (Nnaemeka 238). *Destination’s* turn to women for the knowledge these circumstances impart is a historiographical intervention not because it presents these women’s perspectives as addenda, but because it centres women in the telling of the war’s local effects *and* macro causes.

VI

Having thus centred women in its narrativisation of the Civil War, *Destination* then considers how they resist, transform their environment, or manage to retain as much agency as possible under these circumstances. These take various forms according to shifts in women’s material circumstances. Christie Achebe’s detailed study (2010) of Igbo women in the Civil War reveals a variety of roles, all of which can be

considered active involvement. They foremost entail the essential survival work of procuring food; to fight the food shortages, Igbo women employed "affia attack", the tactic of entering Nigerian-army occupied territories in disguise to buy food and fuel, then smuggle them back across the line of fighting (Achebe 2010, 805). This was both a defensive move in combat, and a reassertion of their dignity, for the blockade had at one and the same time stripped the majority of Igbo women of their agricultural work; of their roles as providers and nurturers; and of the communities of market and field. As rife as the food shortages throughout the war is sexual violence and displacement, and Emecheta pays particular narrative attention to how their psychic and physical consequences are managed by Biafran and Nigerian women. She does so via implying a certain social power to the symbolisation of motherhood and the maternal, in senses including and beyond the biological. This is especially prevalent throughout the second half of the novel in those scenes that weaponise (to deliberately use a term of combat) familial relations like mother, sister and son, using them in moments where war conditions threaten to dehumanise women. This serves in many instances to remind male soldiers (or shame them into remembering) that certain fundamental sociocultural codes are violated at great spiritual risk.

Destination treatment of the maternal as a socially powerful symbol recalls Boehmer's observation of how Emecheta uses the symbolic – she singles out "significant metaphors or defining images" – in a manner interwoven with the "day-to-day", or material reality (2005, 115). This is established first by the novel's gesturing towards the *longue durée* of gender relations in pre-colonial and colonial West Africa. Across Igbo, Yoruba, Fon, Lupe and Edo cultures, instances of women's authority over men exist, especially within cosmologies that conceive of the world as made up of a physical and a spiritual/ancestral half, which have their respective modes of authority and social structures (Achebe et al. 2018). Although Emecheta never explicitly refers to these cosmologies, what we do know from the text is that characters are aware of a precolonial history that had, in some contexts, greater gender parity. An example is the moment where Mr. Teteku, a family friend, seeks to reassure Debbie, who is concerned for her mother's safety:

“But not a woman, we don’t treat women like that.”

Babs and Debbie laughed almost involuntarily and Teteku suspected he knew the reason. In the distant past in that part of Africa women were treated almost as men’s equals, but with the arrival of colonialism their frail claim to equality had been taken away (113).

This collectively known (albeit deemed “taken away”) authority seems to manifest within several scenes in the novel wherein vulnerable women wrest some measure of power away from their wartime oppressors by positioning themselves as (grand)mothers. For instance, when Nigerian soldiers stop a convoy of Igbo refugees and order the women to wait naked by the roadside, Mrs Maduko reminds the young soldiers of certain inviolable social inter-dependencies, such as that of child upon mother:

One bold old woman went to the heap of clothes and took a lappa in which to wrap herself.

“What the hell are you doing? Stop or I’ll shoot,” a soldier said savagely.

“Cover my nakedness, my son. The night is cold and this mother of yours is shivering,” she explained, as patiently as one would to a mentally sick child.

The eager soldier thus addressed by her grumbled incoherently and looked away (164).

Speaking to the soldier “as though to a mentally sick child”, Mrs Maduko shames him out of his bloodlust. The effectiveness of this move – it frequently minimises the threat of violence – suggests there exists a certain social power to the maternal. Emecheta has previously suggested (as in the exchange between Debbie, Babs and Mr. Teteku) that this social power has a history. Not only do Mrs Maduko’s actions gain her agency in a situation of mortal danger, they assert a subjectivity at once ancestral mother and immediate relative (“this mother of yours”) under conditions designed to dehumanise her. Her words also shield her younger female companions. This stand-off between the female refugees and soldiers momentarily exposes the Civil War’s construction of victims and perpetrators out of mothers and sons.

Debbie, whose social class, mixed ethnicity and Oxford education have thus far suggested her distance from motherhood, soon catches on to its social meaning. She manipulates the maternal into an emotive symbol in order to soften a tense exchange with a male stranger, securing herself safe passage eastwards:

“I am to go to my mother,” she lied... “My mother is the only person I have... I am going [to Aba] to make sure she is alright. See?” She ended on an apologetic note.

The man’s strained eyes rested perfunctorily on her and quickly looked away. He heaved a sigh and murmured, “Ah, our mothers. Mine is very old... I want to be by her side” (156).

Motherhood here functions more as a reminder of social interdependencies than necessarily as a reference to a particular history. Here, Debbie evokes her mother to gain some precious mobility as a refugee. The man who had attempted to waylay her then indicates his desire for psychic normalcy through reference to his mother, treated here almost like a symbolic stand-in for peacetime. Both socialise the meaning of motherhood, turning it into a powerful proxy for what neither of them outwardly expresses: their desire for the war to just end, over and above a victory for the Nigerian army. Even the novel’s seemingly most passive and superficial mother, the one-time privileged Stella Ogedemgbe, steps into this power when she must safeguard Debbie’s wellbeing, Transforming from hapless trophy wife to pillar of strength after her daughter Debbie’s rape, we are told “[Stella] had nursed, talked, prayed, then bullied, telling her daughter to put it all behind her, that she could still lead a perfectly normal life — this from a woman who for years had pretended to be so frail and dependent that tying her own headscarf was a big task. All that show of dependence just to feed her husband’s ego” (150). Survival in gendered and neocolonial circumstances has had to take many forms for women, even under relatively comfortable class circumstances like those of Stella’s.

The authority that *Destination*’s women exercise in moments of danger through an invocation of (grand)motherhood is also something that can be considered via the context Christie Achebe provides on control mechanisms in the traumatic circumstances

of the Nigerian Civil War (2010). Drawing from literature on the psychology of control (that is, an individual's actual or perceived ability to influence their situation, for their own survival), Achebe highlights women's forms of secondary control over Civil War conditions, with consist of "attempts to accommodate to objective conditions in order to affect a more satisfying fit with those conditions and control their psychological impact" (Achebe 2010: 789). These secondary control mechanisms involve building social frameworks within which the detrimental effects of violent conditions can be managed. An example Achebe provides from the historical record is that of some Biafran women opening their homes to the education of the children of the community during wartime (2010: 799). Destination demands recognition of such secondary control mechanisms, as the majority of the work of building social frameworks or managing the collective psychic burdens of wartime fell on women. This, too, is one of the social functions attached to the invoking of motherhood in the novel. When Debbie and her fellow refugees pass through an Igbo village that has been attacked, Mrs Maduko stirs all into action by reminding the women that their pain as mothers are shared and understood by all present. This small reassurance must be clung to at that moment in time for everyone's immediate physical and psychic survival. Mrs Maduko, we are told,

listened sympathetically, then said with little preamble, "Our men were useful, yes, very useful; but they have now been killed by other men... In the process of letting your husband provide for you, you have become dumb and passive. Go back to being yourself now. Get up, women, and let us bury the son of another sad woman" (203-4).

She reminds the grieving mothers that survival does not mean acceptance of conditions; rather, those who have become "dumb and passive" must take on the responsibility of being vocal and active in order for inter-dependency to work. Remembering the shared fact of their trauma is not a solution in itself to the gendered violence of neocolonial warfare, but it keeps a total sense of isolation and loss of agency at bay until conditions change.

This is something that Neeta's historical and socio-cultural circumstances do not make possible; displaced from her extended community after forced migration, her refugeedom is not only pauperisation but also de-subjectification. The maternal keeps the elements of collectivity that oppress – holding her gender-bound to self-sacrificial duties – whilst taking away those which emplace, reassure, and empower. Neeta's mother takes part in a violent yet seemingly unbreakable cycle of exploitation: “If Neeta leaves [through marriage], what shall we eat?” she asks. Ghatak without doubt illustrates that her mother's perpetuation of Neeta's pain is down to the demands of sheer survival. Neeta's father Taran points this out when he asks that Neeta have patience with her mother, saying that poverty has “crushed her [mother's] soul”. Manipulating her maternal authority over her children's marriages ensures the survival of her sons and younger daughter, and destroys her eldest daughter. But just as the corruption of maternal power in Ghatak is not a condemnation of individual women but a part of Ghatak's wider call for attention to how Partition's economic and social consequences have negative consequences at the level of intersubjective relations, *Destination's* approving treatment of maternal authority is also part of its own intervention.

It is important to note that images and metaphors of motherhood can frequently run the risk of biological essentialism. However, in the case of *Destination*, it is also clear that these images are dissociated from the ideology of bourgeois domesticity and even biological childbirth. Sadia Zulfiqar notes Emecheta's “difficulties” with a variety of “feminisms that African writers and critics have named, including Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, and Negofeminism” (2016, 14). Although most Emecheta scholars agree that she found “feminist” a Eurocentric label, insufficient for addressing the specific problems facing women in Africa and the diasporas, Onookome Okome points out that Emecheta *did* identify with Womanism (2017, 405),⁴⁷ and her treatment of motherhood correlates with several African feminisms – particularly Motherism,

⁴⁷ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi offers the definition that the “recognition of the impact of racism, neocolonialism, nationalism, economic instability and psychological disorientation on black lives... makes concern about sexism merely one aspect of Womanism” (1985, 65).

which carries meanings beyond motherhood and may have no sex barriers.⁴⁸ Susan Z. Andrade has drawn attention to how Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) gives her protagonist what Flora Nwapa's title character in *Efuru* (1966) wishes for desperately, children – but many times over, to the point of misery. There, “Emecheta interrogates Efuru's ‘tragic flaw’ [of infertility] by shifting responsibility for conception to the man”, and “draws attention to the ironic status of the ‘barren’ Efuru as the ‘mother’ text of (anglophone) African women's literature” (Andrade 2011, 62).

There is a refusal in Emecheta's work to diminish the authority of the maternal to its carefully circumscribed power within the confines of the bourgeois family unit, or to authority solely over who you have biologically given birth to. This is notable in several of her African American contemporaries, too. Strong maternal images and characters have been adopted by writers like Toni Morrison as a complex trope of collective freedom and historical justice, without necessarily being contingent on or emerging from abilities of biological childbirth (Cobb-Moore and Billingsley, 2017). As such, women in *Destination* claim social agency and respect by declaring themselves “mother” to many “children”, as Mrs. Maduko does to disarm the soldiers.

VII

In *Destination*, the methods of resistance to and management of material and psychic suffering results not only in the above modes of female agency over war historiography and their own bodies, but also in the breakdown of some class barriers. Living amongst the refugee women and orphans she travelled east with, Debbie finds herself emplaced within a network of mutual responsibility. This responsibility is one wherein her mental resilience is demanded by and for others, and which in turn helps sustain it for herself. She and the refugee women have established an understanding that has eased the gulf between their class backgrounds, despite the group's initial distrust of

⁴⁸ Motherism is a multidimensional theory that involves the dynamics of ordering, reordering, creating structures, building and rebuilding in cooperation with mother nature at all levels of human endeavour (Acholonu, 1995).

Debbie's Anglicised ways. However, Emecheta is not naïve about the class barriers that remain. For one, Debbie stands out in her inability to complete practical work: "she walked down that dry road in the heat, with the weight of the child almost breaking her back. It struck her that African women her age carried babies like this all day and still farmed and cooked. What kind of African woman was she, indeed?" (181) But her dearly acquired political consciousness is nonetheless treated as significant. Debbie, who understood the neocolonial crony capitalism she was born into but not quite the systematised gendered oppression it operated through, now sees that the latter crucially includes the socio-economic separation of African women. This siloing prevents organising, and the development of the kind of class consciousness she herself acquired throughout her journey East. She grows throughout the novel to understand more about gendered oppression, resistance, and survival through the lived experience of her dependence upon these women for her survival. Deciding that "her mind was made up. No man, not even Abosi, was going to make a fool of her, a fool of all those unfortunate mothers who had lost their sons" (244), Debbie then rejects Alan Grey's offer to come with him to England. She instead stays in Nigeria so as to "tell those orphans the story of how a few ambitious soldiers from Sandhurst tried to make their dream a reality" (245). Her refusal to leave is at once a commitment to use her class privilege to do historiographical work ("tell the story") as well as a reiteration of the Civil War as neocolonial in character (men on both sides are products of British imperialism as "soldiers from Sandhurst").

As such, Debbie's rejection of this one man in particular cannot be read as the novel advocating, in a Western feminist vein, that heterosexual female singledom is independence. Florence Stratton rightly criticises that "the prevailing trend in feminist criticism of African women's writing has been to adopt a Western feminist perspective" (1996: 109), which overlooks the political significance of Emecheta's protagonist's decision. What Debbie says to Alan is an explicit re-alignment with others: "I am not ready to become the wife of an exploiter of my nation" (258). The inter-dependency she has learned makes it possible for Debbie to go from her newly acquired political consciousness to solidarity. She steps into her responsibility to turn women's already

extant (albeit in oral and mnemonic form) history of the Nigerian Civil War into a written one. This decision, and the failure of her official mission as peace-broker when thrust into the experience of refugeedom, is important for her eventual “refusal of a passive role as victim for the testimony-giver” (Harlow 1996: 73). This, in Barbara Harlow’s conception of testimony and struggle, indicates in positive terms an unapologetic arrival at partisanship, or of owning “the active contribution that her narrative makes to the struggle” (73).

As Emecheta’s legacy is deemed to have “created a path of inspiration for contemporary Nigerian women writers” (Nadaswaran 2012, 146), analyses of her novels have often chosen to focus on their varied characterisations of West African women. I have sought to open out from these important considerations of characterisation to the representational techniques and political heft of *Destination*’s choosing to retell the Nigerian Civil War by centring how West African women understood it within the context of neocolonialism, and survived its violent subjective and social effects. This makes the novel reach towards broader claims related to the gendered politics of historiography, which are not about incorporating “a woman’s perspective” into civil war narratives but about challenging the terms of that incorporation altogether, positing instead that the experiences of Nigerian/Biafran women are sources via which comprehensive historiographical work can be done. Marion Pape has drawn attention to how, if a female author claimed her right to war memories, she broke several taboos, as she “not only contravened decency and morals by invading the male terrain of war and the male body and its language [but] also entered a political terrain forbidden to women” (2001, 232). However, we should be cautious of labelling these writers’ undertaking as a “feminine discourse, a counter-discourse... a de-centring and fragmenting of male-dominated hegemonic discourse” (Pape 2001, 232). The tendency to posit African women’s experiences as silences now uncovered by scholarship, to then hold them up as opposite to hegemonic (patriarchal, imperialist) historiographies, not only assumes what was not heard by historians (the local or diasporic intelligensias of the Global North and South) was silent, but also reduces a diversity of experiences into one narrative of counter-hegemony. *Destination*

not only takes the reader beneath the surface of standard nationalist histories, but incorporates psychic life into the narration of political life in the post-independent nation — thereby demonstrating how subjectivity forms an unforgoable part of material analyses of (post)colonial violent conflict.

VIII

The role of literary and filmic texts in recalling, reimagining, and/or analysing the relationship between violence and the post-/colonial state works towards rendering that which is incomprehensible — because of its subjective and collective cacophony of experienced affects — as historicisable. The two texts considered in this chapter thus “gradate between world and self, state and the psyche” (Young 2013, 20) to the effect that, as I have sought to demonstrate, do what Hannah Proctor (2018) has termed “history from within”. Proctor argues that “although interiorities may be obscure, difficult to analyse and inconsistently defined, subjectivity should not be subtracted from analyses of social injustice... Simply equating interiority with bourgeois individualism risks overlooking the generative ways in which an attentiveness to interiority might challenge a tendency to fetishise abstraction and generalisation” (2018. n.p). Agreeing with her caution, in this chapter I have sought to foreground how Ghatak’s and Emecheta’s treatments of subjectivity enable them to capture the material and psycho-social afterlives of Partition and the Nigerian Civil War respectively, in ways that politicise individual psychic suffering as historicisable phenomena. Thus historically situated, individual psychic suffering evidences a collective kind of nation-memory that not only allows that suffering to be read as material oppression, but also affirms how subjective experience carries epistemological and political weight. As such, its narrativisation as a legacy of historical conflict constitutes one of the significant fronts of resistance against the sanctioned and encouraged loss of memory that neocolonial and nationalist historiographies, in their different ways, can perpetuate.

However, where there is no situation of outright war or migration as in *Star* and *Destination*, but a more diffuse and gradual co-optation of formerly colonised people's livelihoods, "resistance" is harder to define. The post-independence re-structuring of the environments people depended on to serve global market demands instead marked a key transition in several African and South Asian postcolonial nations away from the more centralised nation-building approaches of the '60s. These neocolonial arrangements involved both Western finance capital, and buy-in from postcolonial governments. The next chapter considers Indian writer Kamala Markandaya's 1958 novel *Nectar in a Sieve* and Malian director Souleymane Cissé's 1978 film *Work (Baara)*, which follow characters who are at the mercy of their environments for their material survival and ontological security. Growing conscious of the above macro shifts primarily through their effects at the level of interiority and interpersonal relations, these texts' protagonists seek to sustain control over their modes of being in and of their postcolonial environments – especially in the urban factory (*Work*) and the rural village (*Nectar*).

Chapter Five

The Globalising Urban/Rural: Environment and Self-Emplacement in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar In A Sieve* and Souleymane Cissé's *Work*

The words space, place and environment traditionally encompass much of what geographers do and have done, but in recent decades, the meanings attributed to these have become a crucial matter of debate in cultural and literary theory (Carter et al 1993; Huggan and Tiffin 2006; DeLoughrey and Handley 2011). However, anti-colonial thought has long recognised the need to fundamentally redefine the relationship between culture and the environments of postcolonial (nation-)spaces. For Aimé Césaire and Amílcar Cabral, for instance, such a consideration was part and parcel of liberation struggle. Cabral, the one-time agronomy student, wrote that culture arises out of “the physical reality of the environmental humus in which it develops, and it reflects the organic nature of society” (1974, 42). This also entails understanding colonialism’s brutal human economy as simultaneously a socio-environmental oppression, as Césaire described lucidly in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950): “I am talking about natural *economies* that have been disrupted — harmonious and viable *economies* adapted to the indigenous population — about malnutrition permanently introduced, agricultural development oriented solely toward the benefit of metropolitan countries, the looting of products” (2001, 43).

This necessary continuity or interpenetration between human culture and environment is also found, with important differences, in the thought of other leaders of the post-independence decades. These include African animism as a mode of self-emplacement in African environments, as suggested by Léopold Senghor and his fellow theorists of *Négritude* (a relation also expressed by some proponents of “deep ecological” thought today),⁴⁹ and Edouard Glissant’s theory of Relations (1997).

⁴⁹ See also Willoquet-Maricondi (1996).

Meanwhile, works by scholars including Arturo Escobar (1997); Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier (1997); and Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) have demonstrated how addressing history is integral to understanding literary representations of place and environment, and in particular how the roots of the latter's global crises can be found in the colonial order of things, wherein colonised places provided "a primary source of raw materials and a site for state regulation on a scale massive enough to make the cherished Victorian notion of *laissez-faire* an ecological myth and an economic fantasy" (Mukherjee 2010, 18).

Working from this position – that it is impossible to understand history and geography, environment and culture without acknowledging their mutual interpenetration – this chapter considers a novel and film whose contexts and contents overlap upon the post-independence re-structuring of livelihoods and the environments these depended on (as implemented, particularly, by postcolonial governments under the appearance of national industrialisation).⁵⁰ Set roughly two decades after the respective independences of India and Mali, Markandaya's and Cissé's localised narratives of rural and urban post-independence changes are situated within conditions where the transnational movement of capital has begun to re-route or co-opt the trajectories of postcolonial nations, assimilating or openly coercing them into one world-system.⁵¹ We know these shifts happened at different paces and in different forms in India and Mali, but they included processes that strategically pursued, in Etienne Balibar's words, the "realisation of space" for capitalist accumulation (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, 89), and were more or less complete in several African and South Asian postcolonial nation-states by the collapse of the USSR.

⁵⁰ This transition is of course more complex and varied than this summary can capture. Former colonies were already occupying economic positions crucial to the world-system, and found themselves at the dawn of independence largely holding the same systemic function and position. Nor were there sudden shifts but usually a steady assimilation of postcolonial national economies through privatisation, asymmetric contracts, loans, etc. However, it can be said that the already global flows of colonial capital shifted towards new modes and forms of accumulation and expansion from the late '70s onwards in India and West Africa, with these distinct enough from their previous forms to widely receive the new designations of "globalisation" and "neoliberalisation".

⁵¹ See also Escobar (1997).

Although this chapter's texts demand we reflect on the particulars of the postcolonial spaces they describe, explore and interrogate, the settings and experiences they narrate also hold within them the major currents of these global, colonial histories. I seek to bring this mutual interpenetration to bear on postcolonial subjectivity vis-à-vis environment in *Nectar* and *Work*, focusing on how place (with its colonial socio-economic histories), and the subjectivities of those emplaced within them makes possible or precedes what enables politics – whether that politics may be defined as environmentalist or not. What drives characterisation and conflict in both the Markandaya and Cissé is what Arijit Sen and Lisa Silverman describe as embodied placemaking – understanding of and engaging with physical place as a material product of human experience and memory of past events, alongside broad and local economic forces (2014, 13). These everyday forms of engagement have the potential to (though not always successfully) resist, circumvent or confront power that seeks the “realisation of space” (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, 89) for accumulationist ends, proving place and its relationship to subjectivity crucial in shaping the possibilities for agency.

This chapter will first consider Markandaya's construction of a character with and through her environment, focusing especially on the disruption of the customary agricultural and social practices that throughout the novel have constituted her protagonist Rukmani's subjectivity. These practices also shape Rukmani's interpersonal relations with her community, orientating her life through a particular localism – in Arif Dirlik's meaning (1996), which shall be expanded on. Through Cissé's focus on the factory, I will then pursue the relation between subjectivity and labour in the film's representation of postcolonial urban spaces of production. *Work*, which is about a penniless porter whose chance meeting with his distant kin results in a consciousness-raising but dangerous gig at a textile factory, asks whether solidarities can be forged within the hyper-exploitative urban spaces of neocolonialism, without reproducing their relations in another guise.

An amalgam of the complexities of biography, the world literary market, and reception double-standards have led to the perception that Markandaya's *Nectar* was an authentic delineation of "Indian life" for the Western reader. This accounted for its success in the US and the charges of assimilationism and cosmopolitanism from Indian critics. From India, *Nectar* looked unfashionably marked by a validation of peasant suffering and fortitude (Kumar 1996; Srivastava 1987), while in North America it was lauded as an Indian writer's "translation" of "India". Thus "tainted by the patronising tenor of the enthusiastic reception it received in the West at the time of first publication" (George 2009, 400), *Nectar*'s realism, universalism and apparently apolitical subject matter, combined with Markandaya's privileged location and identity as an upper-class, Anglicised, Brahmin writer who lived in London from 1948 onwards, meant it paled in comparison to the attention postcolonial critics bestowed, for example, on V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie (for different reasons) in the 1980s-2000s.

Under such circumstances, Rosemary Marangoly George points out, "the non-Western novelist had once again best present work that can be read in relation to the nation with which she or he is most closely associated. Markandaya's career, with its demonstrably spectacular beginning and dismal end, begs the question as to what kind of nationalist posture was tacitly or explicitly expected (by those in the Western and in the Indian literary, academic, and publishing worlds)" (401). Markandaya was no radical, but she explicitly stated her anti-colonialism, often expressed in the form of a Saidian kind of humanist universalism that did not equate to Eurocentrism.⁵² In a 1963 biographical entry, she describes herself as "anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist in politics" (Markandaya in George 2009, 405); in a later essay, she wrote, "I am not, and have never been, a spokesperson for India — or an ambassador, as they lightheartedly put it" (1976, 27), seemingly in response to those expecting some "nationalist posture" (George 401) of her. One reason as to this uncomfortable fit is the narrow understanding

⁵² Articulated in Edward Said's thought, as Priyamvada Gopal interprets, as "the human capacity for discovery, self-criticism and engaging in 'a continuous process of self-understanding', [to mean] that no one is incapable of humanistic thinking and nothing is exempt from humanism's critical reach" (Gopal 2019, n.p).

of the national that is allowed by the model of national literary competition (Casanova 2004), which is not conducive to reading the imaginaries of nation and nationhood within post-independence literatures – particularly when, as in *Nectar*, the rejection of a national present may be made in an anti-colonial humanist rather than a Western liberal vein. As Aamir Mufti argues, a “national literature” can be the culmination of “heterogeneous and dispersed bodies of writing assimilated onto the plane of equivalence and availability that is literature” (2010, 488), which encompass work like *Nectar* that is written for cosmopolitan audiences but is undeniably concerned with the politics of Indian nationhood as it affects labour, the land, family, social relations, economic change and subjectivity.

Nectar in a Sieve is set in an unnamed Indian village in the fifties and follows the protagonist Rukmani, a tenant farmer, from childhood through marriage and into widowhood. Narrating from her point-of-view, Markandaya, much like R. K. Narayan with his fictional village of Malgudi, does not specify things the characters are themselves unself-conscious of, like language, dialect, caste, and geographical location within India (the problems of these erasures of difference will be returned to). A formative component of Rukmani’s life is the rice paddy she and her husband cultivate, and all the knowledges, experiences and social relations that accompany their situation – that of being at the mercy of natural forces, on the one hand, and at the mercy of their landlord, on the other. These natural and economic forces have demands on Rukmani and Nathan beyond physical labour and the management of their meagre resources. To illustrate these, the novel follows how the characters adapt to changes in harvest; how times of drought and plenty affect their personal psyches and their marital relationship; and how they interact with the nearby town, which provides them access to a market, but also eventually allows the market to dictate their lives.

The bond between the character of Rukmani and this environment is sustained throughout *Nectar* by the recording of its incremental changes, which in turn provoke changes in Rukmani’s wellbeing, life perspective, social consciousness, sexual mores and economic relations – in other words, they shape her subjectivity. In doing so, the

novel presents us Rukmani's subjective and objective reality, whilst foregrounding not only place but also the body's role within it as mutually constituent elements of the environment. For instance, through Rukmani's emotive responses to place, the reader understands both the practical demands of reproducing place, and the effects of place on her subjectivity: "With each tender seedling that unfurled its small green leaf to my eager gaze, my excitement would rise and mount; winged, wondrous," she recounts (Markandaya 1956, 107), remembering the first time she – the literate daughter of a village headman who had never touched a plow – cultivated a crop from seed to plant. Rukmani's everyday forms of engagement with her environment are described to the reader in ways that point to the production of what Paul Connerton calls "place-memory... a combination of cognitive and habit-memory" (2009, 8), which produces and reproduces itself through habitualised social practices. These practices also sustain the material environment in which they are embedded. This reciprocity has parallels with Fanon's conception of the everyday, which for him is the only legitimate location for the making of "new men" (1961, 239). That is, the remaking of material life itself after colonialism – especially the modes of production and social reproduction – is the location and means of the remaking of subjectivities.

Due in part to the spatiality of Cissé's chosen medium of film, *Work* more explicitly links the reproduction of its environments to quotidian social practices. This is done through the city's everyday human vistas and objects, while sustaining the interdependency I have described above via *Nectar*. Divided between spaces of production and spaces of reproduction, West African urban spaces, like many others, have local concentrations of specific activities, and *Work* depicts these differences with inflections of class and gender (from the *griots* in the street to the consumer products on a bourgeois woman's dressing table). This shows the important variances in people's embodied experiences of place in the same city, and the various effects the latter can have on subjectivity and inter-subjective relations. *Nectar*'s characters are, however, more conscious of their own emplacement within their environment. One reason is suffering at the hands of nature, as each day Rukmani undertakes hard farm and household labour. She describes frequent periods of drought: "Other farmers and their

families, in like plight to ourselves, were also out searching for food; and for every edible plant or root there was a struggle — a desperate competition that made enemies of friends and put an end to humanity” (Markandaya 91).

Throughout cycles of difficulty and respite, Rukmani sees her environment and herself bound in a sustained exchange of labour, nourishment, destruction and renewal that helps constitute her sense of place and self. To illustrate this, Markandaya's descriptions often contain both the natural phenomenon and its lived experience simultaneously, establishing how Rukmani's sensory observation of her environment is also creating place-memory: “each time I paused I could hear sparrows twittering, and the thin, clear note of a mynah” (53); “It rained so hard, so long and so incessantly that the thought of a period of no rain provoked a mild wonder. It was as if nothing had ever been but rain” (43); “the purple brinjals and yellow pumpkins, the shiny green and red chillies” (27). These multi-sensory descriptions extend beyond knowledges of survival around sowing and reaping, demonstrating how her environment's visual, aural and sensual elements are orientating for the protagonist. Although they can read like romantic descriptions in isolation, the narrative weaves them into a whole that consists of both such sensory observations and of the economic necessities of rural life.

In light of some strains of ecocritical feminism that elevate romantic textual representations of peasant women within a wider biological-essentialist tendency, what I mean by this constituting or orientating of subjectivity bears examining. The ecofeminist empirical claim, which examines the sociopolitical and economic structures that reduce many women's lives to poverty, ecological deprivation, and economic powerlessness (Eaton and Lorentzen 2003, 2), is a valuable contribution to thought on the relationship between gender, environment and capitalism. Its conceptual claims reveal how patriarchal ideologies work in intersection with these forces towards the domination of women and the exploitation of nature. But as critics including Ruvani Ranasinha (2016), Gayatri Spivak (1993), and Kumari Jayawardena (1986) have discussed in different contexts, its epistemological claims about the relationship between women and the natural environment often suggest a problematically symbiotic

relationship. Concerns raised have included the usefulness of constructions of land-as-woman for nationalist discourses; its equating of womanhood with reproductive capacity; and its currency in various other gendered national imaginaries and racist developmentalist discourses. For example, a suggestion like “Woman-centred literature celebrates able, intelligent women as shapers of landscape... Rather than dominate or conquer land, they enjoy a cooperative, harmonious relationship with environment” (Zeleny 1997, 24) can translate easily into the notion (perpetuated by Freudian psychoanalysis) of a first nature — the unknowable, essential, feminised Other — and second nature, the knowing, male, doing, self-in-society, which “pacifies” the former to generate productivity.⁵³

That said, as Neelam Jabeen (2020) has proposed, rendering all ecofeminist claims of a woman-nature connection as essentialist and culturalist would also discredit the real, material connections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of land that postcolonial eco-feminism seeks to attend to. When applied in literary criticism of postcolonial texts, any broad-brush charge like the former would also be overlooking the fact that the culturally constructed woman-land association cannot merely be considered as symbolic in South Asian (post)colonial texts.⁵⁴ Given that the “female characters these texts present are actually treated as land” (Jabeen 1098) in many instances, probing this constructed association also yields insights into the material forces determining postcolonial spaces, such as environmental destruction, dispossession and privatisation (with all of their asymmetries along gender and class lines).

As such, although I do not suggest a symbiotic relationship between Markandaya’s protagonist and her natural environment by virtue of her cisgendered, reproductive body, there *is* a relationship between Rukmani’s embodied subjectivity and

⁵³ Of course, “first nature” itself is not neutral or ahistorical. It was originally produced in early modernity “as something at odds with culture/society. In this phase, (white, western) men and the ‘male’ symbolic logic they represent are developing on the basis of their opposition to everything female that has consequentially been naturalised” (Flatschart 2018, 139).

⁵⁴ See also Kolondy (1973) and Howes (2005) for studies of the literary construction of feminised land.

the land, one wherein we can see a conceptualisation of subjectivity that is neither the Enlightenment notion of the autonomous individual, tacitly classed, raced and gendered, nor a biological-essentialist one.⁵⁵ It is a self sustained via the place-memory that the rice paddy holds for her, and via its cultivation. Both are immediately linked to Rukmani's physical survival and therefore her psychic wellbeing. In this sense, the woman-land link in *Nectar* is undeniable: not by virtue of essence, but by the fact that the "fruitful work" of its cultivating "gives body and form" to its protagonist's "consciousness" (Fanon 1961, 204). For example, although fertility and motherhood are recurring themes in *Nectar* (in keeping with the centrality of childbearing to the protagonist's economic and cultural circumstances), the novel does not configure the land as female – whether in the way it is utilised in nationalist discourses such as those around Partition (Daiya 2008), or in the reproductivity-based parallels that the aforementioned biological-essentialist eco-feminisms draw.

Such parallels discount observations made by Marxist feminist criticism and human geography around the fundamentally gendered status of nature. Their attempts to attribute some abstract power to womanhood can serve to reinforce "the woman-as-nature/woman-as-land formulation upon which the international division of labor under capitalist-patriarchy is itself predicated" (Krishnan 2019, 294). Rukmani's environment, with both its natural rhythms and even its temperamental changes, provides her with an ontological security that comes not so much from her mastery over it due to some essential "womanhood" in alignment with the "natural", but from empirical knowledge of *its* nature. That is, knowledge of when and where her environment must be conceded to: "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work hard for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat" (Markandaya 1954, 43). This embodied knowledge of place, represented here via the allegory of the trained (not tamed) animal, is one example of the material, non-

⁵⁵ See also Spivak in *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999) on how the Enlightenment notion of the subject needs the "differential example of the savage [...] a requirement of the thinking of autonomy itself and cannot therefore be cultivated out of the system" (Lloyd 2013, 93).

essentialist relationship between the two that *Nectar* sustains. Thus “cognitive[ly] mapping” her locality, to reintroduce Jameson’s idea as discussed in Chapter 3, informs Rukmani’s knowledge of herself as a part of her surroundings. Configuring this relationship on the basis of Rukmani’s lived experience of rural labour *as a woman* allows the minute details of her spatial location and the practices tied to her landscape to function in the novel as “a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall” (Jameson 1992, 5). As economic and social changes begin in earnest when the nearby town gets a tannery, we shall see that this spatio-subjective narrative method begins to delineate for the reader the contours of the emerging world-system that backdrops *Nectar*'s time.

II

The protagonist’s looking to her environment for both self-orientation and knowledges for economic survival is ontology entwined with geography, and it opens out onto the question of resistance when her environment is transformed. “Change I had known before, and it had been gradual. But the change that now came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye,” Rukmani narrates (24), describing the coming of an industrial tannery. The major part of the novel charts this systemic change from the semi-feudal, semi-capitalist conditions of tenant farming to an economic situation where power is further dispersed. The family still pays rent to some absent *zamindar* as part of a socio-economic bind they know and fulfil. But they are now also squeezed by the higher prices that follow the waged new workforce in their midst. Although Rukmani refers to the tranquility of their lives before the village grew into a town, her and her husband Nathan's relatively smooth tenancy, we are told, is the mere luck of a benign landlord: “unlike some, [Shivaji] did not extract payment in kind to the last grain; he allowed us to keep the gleanings; he did not demand from us bribes of food or money” (35). As Vijay Prashad notes, the conversion of feudal landlords into capitalist landlords and the conversion of tenant serfs into the agrarian proletariat did not break the back of feudalism in India

(2019, 89). The agrarian proletariat experienced harsh pauperisation because of the overlay of the spatial configurations of neocolonial capitalism onto old feudal relations. This was exacerbated by the unequal penetration of the two: that is, landlords re-invested little of their profits to modernise agriculture, though modernised industry had already arrived. Indeed, Paul Brass argues that this was not a bug but a feature; the post-independence Indian government's agricultural production programmes sought "to leave the prevailing patterns of rural control and dominance in the countryside intact to avoid precipitating rural class conflict", while avoiding "diverting significant resources from plans for rapid industrialisation" (Brass 1990, 306).

Despite the narrative establishing these systemic continuities, however, it also highlights differences between competition for survival, and competition born of desire for profit. Unlike the tough but self-sustaining work of the harvest, Rukmani and her family's sufferings at the hands of the market are shown to be disorienting in their ruthlessness and political in nature:

"Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Day and night the tanning went on. A never-ending line of carts brought the raw materials in – thousands of skins, goat, calf, lizard and snake skins – and took them away again tanned, dyed and finished. It seemed impossible that markets could be found for such quantities – or that so many animals existed – but so it was, incredibly" (51).

Here, as the town begins to manufacture goods for national and perhaps global markets, the emphasis on volume and variety — "never-ending", "thousands", "such quantities" — connotes unnaturalness, over-consumption and species extinction. It is a state of things beyond the balance of give-and-take thus far verified by Rukmani's own empirical knowledge of the land: "They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maidan where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us... They lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter" (32). The tannery (owned by an absent, unnamed English man) thus forces change at an economic and spatial level, but also at a subjective and intersubjective level. One Diwali, Rukmani remembers a neighbour who left when the tannery put their

stall out of business: “Last year Janaki had come with us, she and her children. This year who knew — or cared? The black thought momentarily doused the glow within me” (59). Markandaya here highlights the subjective distress Rukmani experiences as she realises how easily one can assimilate change for the worse. The sights, smells, and sounds of communal celebration are haunted by her memory of a family whose livelihood was swallowed by the tannery, but also by the interpersonal effects of this change. Now, “nobody cared” so long as it was not them. This, Rukmani seems to foresee, will only compound the downturn in their material conditions: people, she observes, “were reconciled... the readier to grasp the present” (33). It is not change itself that she resists, cyclicity being the rhythm of her rural life, but easy reconciliation to the “grasp[ing]” present.

This picture of clear material and ontological overlap problematises a persisting scholarly argument, for instance, that Markandaya's novel is a juxtaposition of the “modern” and the “traditional” (Misra 2001, 41) – with little contention about whether the two terms even have stable meanings here. One such assumption is set up by Malti Agrawal, who argues “had [Rukmani] been educated and self-sufficient, she [could]... struggle for her rights and eventually reach self-actualisation” (2007, 135). Fawzia Afzal-Khan posits that “Markandaya establishes peasants as heroic figures of the mythic mode...” (1993, 100); and Pravati Misra that Rukmani’s character clearly conforms to “the traditional image of women embodied in the mythical figures of Sita and Savitri, who silently bear all hardships... cling[ing] stubbornly to a belief in the old ways and in the power of the land to sustain its people” (Misra 2001, 41). The work of the Subalternists have somewhat contributed to reinforcing this juxtaposition, particularly after Ranajit Guha’s work (1998) on the political psychology of peasants.⁵⁶ “Tradition-modernity clash” interpretations of *Nectar* render Rukmani an archetypal peasant in the Subalternists’ sense: entirely community-oriented, unconscious of exploitation, and indeed unconscious altogether of a self as she lives for her children, husband, and

⁵⁶ See also H. Singh (2002) and Vivek Chibber (2013) for responses.

community. In fact, far from ahistorical archetypes, *Nectar*'s characters act upon their changing circumstances, while allowing for some circumstances to act upon them.

Nor do Rukmani and her husband "bear all hardships" as one; Rukmani's literacy informs her consciousness differently. For instance, when their belongings are stolen in the city on route to their son, she thinks, "the ease with which Nathan accepted the misfortune irritated me. Now I shall be wholly indebted to my daughter-in-law" (151). Furthermore, the coming of the tannery and its subsequent transformation of everyday life has Rukmani reaffirming her socio-spatial position by contrasting it with the one being put to her. Her conscious choice is a political choice:

"In the town there were the crowds, and streets battered down upon the earth, and the filth that men had put upon it, and one walked with care for what might lie beneath one's feet or threaten from before or behind. And in this preoccupation one forgot to look at the sun or the stars, or even to observe they had change their setting in the sky: and knew nothing of the passage of time save in dry frenzy, by looking at the clock. But for us, who lived by the green, quiet fields, perilously close though these were to the town, nature still gave its muted message. Each passing day, each week, each month, left its sign, clear and unmistakable" (117).

This is not just Markandaya "idealis[ing] the countryside to call attention to its demise" (Zeleny 1997, 27); there is something less simplistic being explored in passages like these, which situate embodied experience as key to reassuring one's subjectivity under fluctuating social and economic conditions.

The view Rukmani demonstrates above is suggested in Sharda Jain's more careful observation that Markandaya's protagonist "voices the disgust of a thousand dispossessed families, saying, 'while there was land, there was hope'" (2007, 153). As Jain hints, the "tradition-modernity clash" line of interpretation falls short most of all in recognising the novel's representation of the lived experience of what Neil Lazarus calls the "second moment" of the generalisation of commodity production and wage labour across the globe. "Governed by the experience of 'globalization' – of capitalist modernization in its phase of consolidation, regularisation, and global dispersal", the

global peasantry, far from being a class left behind in the sweep of time, has been very much part of the story of capitalist modernisation (Lazarus 2018, 165-173). In *Nectar* we see peasant life in the new Indian nation-state is particularly subject to ever-changing pressures and demands. Passages like the above that at face-value may read like a “stubborn belief in the old ways” (Misra 41) actually suggests both consciousness of the interdependence of the two spaces, and an economic anxiety about the tannery having “muted” those “message[s]” from nature that Rukmani must be receptive to for their own survival.

III

The “second moment” of capitalist modernisation (Lazarus 2018, 165) is also about re-defining human value, and this characterises another thread that associates subjectivity and place throughout the novel. Rukmani’s two elder sons Thambi and Arjun participate in labour organisation at the tannery, and this results in their deaths; Rukmani is told they died stealing, even though they had been on strike for better conditions. In one scene, two tannery representatives warn her not to seek economic recompense for their deaths:

“He should not have struggled. In these circumstances you naturally have no claim on us.’

‘Claim?’ I said. ‘I have made no claim. I do not understand you.’

He made a gesture of impatience.

‘You may think of it later, and try to get compensation. I warn you, it will not work.’

Compensation, I thought. What compensation is there for death?” (95)

The logics of industrialised capital are revealed not only as harsh— something Rukmani’s lived experience had already told her — but also as inscribing a quantifiable value to human life, where “unproductive” means “criminal”. Its answer to human death is the tighter protection of property.

In addition to this is the centrality of artifice to social relations under this same market logic. This is exemplified by the contrast Rukmani sees as she observes the town's fierce street children, who, "when a man of wealth passed, were as tender and pitiful as fledglings, with an artfulness which surely my children had not at their command" (155). When Rukmani and Nathan find out their city-dwelling son left his young family to chase higher wages – not for survival, but for excess – they see this as their failing: "We gave him life, we should have taught him better" (155). This continues to go understudied in *Nectar* scholarship; Rahmat Jahan reads in the novel a "struggle between man and overpowering hunger, before which honour, morality, and even God do not count" (2009, 202), while Jabeen argues "almost every act of each individual is a survival tactic, a means to fight hunger and starvation" (2020, 1100). In fact, passages like the above clearly suggest there are other things that "count", even in their situation of hunger and poverty.

To historicise the economic changes Rukmani witnesses, rather than dub them a conflict between "traditional" and "modern", requires observing in *Nectar* how capitalism has to produce fixed spaces in its compulsion to eliminate geographical barriers. The reluctance of Jain, Agrawal and other critics (Zeleny 2017; Rogobete 2014; Prasad 1984) to name the "industrial values" and "modern" forces they talk of as capitalism – and from there to read the historicity of the economic changes Markandaya is narrating – means they skip many scenes (like the three discussed above) that intertwine the natural environment, subjectivity, and neocolonial capitalism. When Rukmani laments the loss of their rural way of life, she is lamenting the destruction of a particular set of spatial relations and temporal orientations, as the forces of the "second moment" (Lazarus 2018) of capitalist modernity forges "a geographical landscape appropriate to its own dynamic of accumulation at a particular moment of its history, [which it will] destroy and rebuild to accommodate accumulation at a later date" (Harvey 2000, 59). This destruction is therefore something more specific and historicisable than what the above critics allow for when they reach for the terminology of "opening up" a "traditional" world to the "modern".

When we do away with the unstable categories of traditional and modern, we can instead specify what the novel is doing as narrativising how capitalism is having to destroy the semi-feudal structural form it had earlier operated through, so as to re-configure space to accommodate the neocolonial scale of accumulation yet to come in India's later twentieth century.⁵⁷ This spatial overhaul also marks either the internalisation or the refusal of these re-configurations. On the day of their eviction, for instance, Rukmani commits her surroundings to memory to reassure herself of the impermanence of the exile to come: "the brown mud walls that had crumbled many a time and rebuilt... Coconut thatching, some of it still part of the old palm that lightning had destroyed, as I could tell from the colour" (136). The cognitive power of this established place-memory helps her survive her post-displacement environs. This relationality will prove the precondition of what resistance in this novel looks like.

IV

Before examining where in the novel we can find resistance to the above circumstances, delineating what is meant by resistance in this context is important. Women's resistance to incorporation into the world-system has been and continues to be constituted by many activities. Although including organised resistance, these also entail forms that are too often relegated to the realms of the psychic, social, or interpersonal. As Kathryn B. Ward argues (1993), world-system theory has too often overlooked women's diverse resistance to those processes of incorporation that have disparate effects of socio-economic development on women relative to men. Ward proposes "we need to redefine our notions of work, resistance, and incorporation to encompass the range of women's labours" (57) — a call that I stress must also extend to any false separation between resistance to the subjective effects of this incorporation, and resistance to its material effects. Thus theories like the "environmentalism of the poor" (Nixon 2011) must be mediated by an emphasis like Ward's (1993) on inequities

⁵⁷ See also Arturo Escobar (2010) on how this spatial re-configuration operates through developmentalism.

along gender lines, and by the Fanonian materialist conception of subjectivity that this project foregrounds.

Resistance in *Nectar* stems largely from the tannery as an allegory that distills the new world-systemic moment in a “particular spatial or narrative model of the social totality” (Jameson 1993, 5). In doing so, it facilitates consciousness in Rukmani of the role of social relations in bolstering or hindering the onslaught of this external power:

“Somehow I had always felt the tannery would be our undoing. It had changed the face of our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of its inhabitants. Some had been raised up; many others cast down, lost in its clutches. And because it grew it got the power that money brings, so that to attempt to withstand it was like trying to stop the onward rush of the great juggernaut... There had been a time when we, too, had benefited, but we had lost more than we had gained or could ever regain” (135).

“The power that money brings” is nothing new to her, but the unprecedented scale of this kind of capital has also changed the “face” of the village this time, with some “lost” to it. Markandaya's protagonist recounts these forever transformed social relations within the context of the penetration of capital. This is crucial knowledge that helps Rukmani understand the latter's rewards as uneven and transient: they “had benefited” first, then “lost more than [they] could ever regain”. Her refusal to partake of this power that changes the “face” of a place, and follows up any meagre benefit with insurmountable loss, locates political knowledge at the level of subjectivity.

This knowledge results in a choice that cannot but be read as resistance. When Rukmani and Nathan's hopes of living with their son in the city turns out to be in vain (their daughter-in-law, hardened by her own poverty, turns them away) the elderly couple shelter in a temple, destitute. There, “with each passing day [their] longing for the land grew; brown earth and green fields and the rustling rice paddy, not, curiously, as they were, but as [they] had first known them... Keeping pace with these longings, [their] distaste for the city grew and grew and became a sweeping, pervasive hatred. ‘Whatever awaits us, we must return,’ [Nathan said]” (169). The nature of the resistance

they choose is both an ontological and a material one: it comprehends the affinity between rejecting economic participation in the new world-system and reaffirming pre-existing interdependencies with place. However, they must temporarily participate in the hyper-exploitative spaces of that system to earn enough to return. Nourishing itself from their place-memory of home, their resistance to the subjective effects of their displacement – such as despair, amnesia, or the internalisation of the imperatives of accumulation – increases their chances of survival.

This resistance is not manifest in direct confrontation (there being no enemy but the faceless and dispersed workings of capitalist extraction), but in the couple's retention of their capacity to trust; find solidarity with their fellow labourers; and "save" one of the future generation. Guided by a streetwise orphan named Puli, Rukmani and Nathan break rocks at a stone quarry to save funds to return home. They experience unexpected bouts of conviviality with strangers in an otherwise ruthless situation; for example, when Puli begs at the end of a shift, Rukmani thinks, "Wrong place. Only the poor come here", but then "to [her] astonishment [she] saw one or two had dropped pies into his bowl" (174-5). She begins to feel a sense of solidarity, where she had previously been on edge: "The man behind me kept prodding me with his baskets until at last I turned around in irritation. Then I saw he was a very old man, and the load he carried kept slipping. My irritation vanished" (174). Rukmani and Nathan, seeing Puli's knowledge of the town and its ways stems from Puli's lived experience, also trust that co-dependence will sustain them better. "Whatever we earned we entrusted to [Puli]... We had become dependent on the boy, respecting his independent spirit as much as his considerable knowledge of the city and its many kinds of people" (178). Their temporary family unit works out of trust in one another's respective epistemic privileges when it comes to environment. These choices stem from a particular way of being in place, one that is not yet lost to Rukmani despite her loss of home.

While resistance can thus be read in this novel through the ontological refusal of forced re-emplacement, there are limits to interpreting these dynamics as *Nectar* proposing social interdependency and place-memory keep market forces at bay. Caste, for example, is one evasion the novel must make in order to place its faith in social interdependency. Rukmani never mentions the castes of Puli, the quarry workers, or others she meets in the city, which presumably would not have the social homogeneity of her village. The latter may have been imagined as belonging to a region less impacted than Punjab or Bengal by post-Partition migration (such as Markandaya's native state of Karnataka) but this evasion is still a marked difference from earlier Anglo-Indian writing that has worked with juxtapositions of village and city, like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938). In the Rao, the contentious relationship between the two is mapped onto Gandhian ideology's rejection of strictures against caste pollution, which is "seen by some to be the word from the city, to be either lionised or repudiated as such" (Gopal 2009, 48). Either *Nectar's* fictional city has (incredibly) wholly embraced this Gandhian call; Rukmani has lived too sheltered a life to understand caste difference when she sees it; or in the "any Indian village" vein of R. K. Narayan's *Malgudi*, this is Markandaya's own representational choice. Whether this evasion bespeaks a view on Markandaya's part that an exclusively Hindu environment has some kind of "authenticity" that is marred in urban spaces by their heterogeneity, or simply of Markandaya's own class and geographical distance to rural South India, the question remains.

This does not, however, dismiss the validity of the relationship the novel draws between subjectivity and environment in the context of post-independence rural transformation. Its ending is particularly significant in this regard. Having resisted both permanent displacement and internalising the transactional social relations that have accompanied capitalist market penetration, Rukmani returns to her home village where her daughter, son and grandson await her. It is not a return to an idyll or to the past: the hard labour of the quarry has killed Nathan; her daughter Ira can never marry, having borne from sex work a child with albinism; and her remaining son is unemployed until the local medical centre is built. But in having refused at a subjective and interpersonal

level what she can of both capitalist industrialisation and feudal patriarchy (she refuses to turn away her “ruined” daughter, protects her grandson from her community’s ableism, and adopts Puli), Rukmani is able to re-embed herself in the environment that once constituted her subjectivity. The changes her experiences have wrought upon her, and the changes the world-system is wreaking upon her village, remain. But she nonetheless “looked about [her] at the land, and it was life to [her] starving spirit” (188).

I have not sought to interpret Markandaya’s protagonist as a “natural” ecologist or suggest the landless peasant is closer to “traditional” pre-colonial culture. As Ramachandra Guha, Juan Martinez-Alier and Robert Nixon amongst others have proposed in their work on the environmentalisms of the poor, I agree that the green commitments of the most dispossessed “are seamed through with other economic and cultural causes, as they experience environmental threat not as a planetary abstraction but as a set of inhabited risks, some imminent, others obscurely long term” (Nixon 2011, 4). Whether on grounds of politics, period, or impact, *Nectar* cannot without tension be placed amidst works by Arundhati Roy, Indra Sinha, Mahasweta Devi, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Nadine Gordimer or Jamaica Kincaid, who all interrogate those global and national forces that have dispossessed the poorest in postcolonial nations. But *Nectar* does narrate a node in the same global process, giving imaginative form to what is at stake in terms of the inter-relationships of place and subjectivity.

VI

Watching for such relations between subjectivity and place in Malian director Souleymane Cissé’s 1978 film *Work (Baara)* similarly reveals not only those material forces that led in post-independence decades to the “worlding of the West African world” (Krishnan 2018, 177), but also where and when the latter’s processes encounter resistant subjects. Often deeply attuned to the contradictions, hidden agendas, and oversimplifications behind many avowedly national aims, Cissé’s seventies works harness the power of aesthetics to criticise the forces of neocolonialism and capitalism

in obstructing decolonisation. While post-independence West African films never translated into a single “type” of filmmaking, as Roy Armes (1987) observes (be that along thematic, contextual, linguistic, generic or formal lines), many – like Med Hondo’s *Soleil Ô* (1970) and Sarah Maldoror’s *Sambizanga* (1972) – critique the practices that secured and perpetuated those conditions that were taking the continent further away from the promise of decolonisation. Situated amongst them, Cissé’s second feature *Work* is especially attuned to the role of urban space in the reproduction of capitalist norms, as well as its incubation of resistance to these same norms. The film depicts both the structural forces at play in everyday life in Bamako, and the subjectivities of its characters; in doing so, it captures how space both reproduces both the conditions, and the consciousness that can challenge them.

The spaces of *Work* are also its filmmaker’s own lived economic, linguistic, and political spaces. France left behind a particular media landscape in Senegal, Mali, Mauritania and Côte d’Ivoire amongst others, which was Paris-controlled in an economic sense more than an artistic sense. Manthia Diawara’s apt term for this situation is “technological paternalism” (1987, 61). The French Ministry of Cooperation’s *Bureau du Cinéma* provided technical assistance to 185 shorts and features made between 1963 and 1975 by Francophone Africans, making up eighty percent of all Black African film production (Andrade-Watkins 1996, 112). This often conceived the latter along French norms of an *auteur*-led Second Cinema. Programmes of French aid for culture, meanwhile, “existed independently from the commercial distribution system in Francophone Africa, which was under the joint monopoly of French companies SECMA and COMACICO, who excluded African films from African commercial screens” (Armes 1986, 233). Thus the French system of distribution and film aid was able to sustain two equally profitable practices. On the one hand, they could nurture then introduce West African filmmakers to elite metropolitan audiences; on the other, they could distribute commercial French and American films to the

audiences of West Africa, a large new market that could help cover mainstream Euro-American cinema's high overhead costs.⁵⁸

Sembène and Cissé both did their feature films with a mixture of funding sources. They took on out of necessity the roles of scriptwriters, producers, directors all at once in their own works. Sembène describes the impossible bind the above neocolonial set-up placed upon West Africa's first filmmakers: "We are enclosed in a web of contradictions... If an African country had proposed a budget to me I would have accepted with joy... But I will not wait, sitting on a chair, for my country to take in hand all its political and economic destinies [before making a film]" (Sembène in Busch and Annas 2008, 10-11). Both, however, learned the craft of filmmaking not in France but in the Soviet Union; Cissé's training at the VGIK film school in Moscow in the 1960s "allowed him to bring a critical gaze shaped by Marxist concepts of class analysis to his first three feature-length studies of contemporary Mali" (Armes 2006, 78). The "web of contradictions" Sembène describes runs strongly throughout Cissé's *Work*, wherein an abundance of French commodities are utilised by the Malian elite – while even goods produced for the domestic market carry imprints of the Francophone "world" (as in one scene I will return to, which features cotton cloth being industrially printed with a portrait of Jacques Foccart).

Exploited productive and social reproductive labours are a constant in Cissé's other two early period films, *Den Muso* (1975) and *Finye* (1982); however, the lived everyday of a postcolonial urban setting is distinct to *Work*. It deliberately uses the built environment as a container of these two themes, propelling its story frequently through spatial formal choices like framing, sequencing, architecture, shape and texture. To recall Fanon's theorisation in *Wretched* and *African Revolution* on the remaking of everyday life, it is "the very forms of organization of the struggle [that will] suggest to [people] a different vocabulary" of social interdependency: one that rejects the notion of

⁵⁸ An important exception to such a West African cinema were the development of cinemas in Angola and Guinea-Bissau, which were directly born of armed revolutionary movements. Centring documentaries linked to struggles for independence, its early examples looked to Brazilian and Cuban Third Cinema. See Hoefert de Turégano (2003)

“each person locked in his subjectivity” (1961, 36). This translates well into the dialectic *Work* sets up between shifts in consciousness and the spaces of (the) struggle. Depicting an urban locale where Western capital cheapens African labour with the help of African governments that violently check any form of resistance, the political potential of the everyday within which this exploitation occurs grows visible.

With this in mind, I will examine the representation of the urban spaces within which Cissé’s narrative unfolds – including the factory, the street, the home, and the office – so as to locate ways of being in those spaces that *Work* suggests could evade, stopper, or reroute neocolonialism’s profit-optimising imperatives. Agreeing with an assertion like Julia Hallam’s – that “the interdisciplinary study of moving images, and the cultures of distribution and consumption that develop in tandem with the production of those images, provides insights into our knowledge of the development of urban modernity and modern subjectivity” (2010, 277-8) – I emphasise that the interpenetration of place and subjectivity within the cinematic representation of urban African spaces yields relevant material for the “spatial turn” in postcolonial scholarship (Upstone 2009; Soja 2011; Krishnan 2017; Quayson 2020), and for work within Urban Studies that attends to the production of everyday life for urban majorities in the Global South, like AbdouMaliq Simone’s (2018). Tracing how place in *Work* incubates political consciousness even as it reproduces classed and gendered exploitation, I suggest that the film offers a dialectical understanding of the relationship between place and subjectivity, then draws attention to how that relationship can and does give rise to various forms of resistance.

Work follows two young men whose fates are intertwined by their distant kinship: Balla Traoré, a middle manager at a textile factory, and Diarra, a good-natured but oftentimes naïve porter who keeps getting harassed off the streets by the police. Although Balla is instructed by his boss Sissoko (an old nationalist of the independence generation, whose father made his wealth by stealing public funds) to lay off his workers to cover the factory’s 200 million Franc debt, he secretly disobeys. Balla pays Diarra’s bail when he is jailed for failing to produce an ID, and gives him a job at his

factory; he then sets about facilitating a workers' meeting on conditions, wages and hours. Word reaches Sissoko that, far from cutting costs, his young manager has decreased working hours, given labourers discounts on cloth, and encouraged them to organise. He has his lackeys lure Balla away from the workers' meeting to strangle him. Sissoko then returns to his bourgeois home to find his younger wife Djeneba with a lover, and strangles her. As the workers carry Balla's body home, they block Sissoko's car until the police arrive and arrest him for his wife's murder.

Through this chronologically linear and relatively simple plot, *Work* demonstrates the ways in which material and ontological relations within urban postcolonial environments are mutually constitutive. I will first trace how this is established through Cissé's representation of Balla, which, through emphasis on his bodily awkwardness in the classed space of the factory, configures this space as one of tension between the political ideals of the educated post-independence generation and the material conditions that make them who they are (at the expense of others). Related to this is Cissé's masterful use of close-ups on the labourers of the factory and the city more broadly. These zero in on the interiorities of his unnamed characters, depicting them in a state of alienation from their labours in the Marxian sense – “that [they] belong, not to [themselves], but to another” (Marx 2007, 72). But these close-ups, I will propose, also communicate the skilled and creative nature of their labours, which produce a social, cultural and material wealth largely denied them. Moving from this focus on faces to that on architecture, I next attend to how *Work* raises the question of whether national and therefore ostensibly “postcolonial” urban spaces – with their particular pan-African architectural symbolisms and their social functions – can help foster consciousness of this neocolonial reality within those living through it. Finally, in considering the film's striking climax of femicide and vigilante justice, I will trace how *Work* asks whether postcolonial urban environments can inform subjectivities capable of resisting its gendered and classed conditions without reproducing them in another guise.

The French colonial imaginary conceived of space as external to the self: a domain upon which one could act, the better to administer the populations that inhabited it. One “lived ‘in’ space; one did not create space by interaction with it. It was thus an inert realm which could be remodelled, not a realm which was in process” (Langford 2005, 103). Its configuration as such helped facilitate not only the erasure and oppression of the indigenous inhabitants of a place and their ontologies about it, but also the re-inscribing of its non-human elements as raw material awaiting “use”. Such “spatial strategies”, Henri Lefebvre explains (1991, 112), not only unfold in space, it they are also about space — its appropriation, deployment, and control. These spatial strategies are also designed to support and maintain relations of power or of resistance, and can be seen as “articulating the physical-material and mental-imaginative aspects of social space” (Deshpande 1998, 250). Cissé cinematically delineates Bamako's spatial order as one that makes use of the material aspects, as well as the lived experience of social environments, to compel these spaces to produce for and integrate into the neocolonial routes of global capital.

The film first reveals these strategies at work in the factory, as they are experienced by differently classed characters. For example, the viewer learns nearly all there is to know of the educated, idealistic Balla's class, politics and social relations through his bodily movements within and across various spaces. He ventures freely across the many thresholds of the factory.



Fig. 13: The inspection (Dir. Souleymane Cissé, 1978)

When he walks amongst the workers at their stations and attempts to talk to them over the noise of the machinery, Cissé's choice of a tracking shot (the camera follows alongside a subject but cannot get closer or farther away) to chart Balla's progress along the factory floor gives the viewer a sense of his transience (*Fig. 13*). He cranes his neck to see the work done, sometimes moving on too fast. It is increasingly obvious that he is physically out of place amongst all this noisy, fast-paced manual productivity. The viewer understands that, although a character conscious of his station, Balla dislikes the class demarcations reproduced by the spatial configuration of his workplace; he attempts to get "stuck in", but only ends up inconveniencing his workers as they move to let him through. Mutual intelligibility between overseer and worker becomes impossible due to the noise and smell – factors that also remind the viewer of the uninterrupted productivity upon which Balla's own wages depend.

Just as this theme of ceaseless production is shown to directly effect the natural environment in *Nectar*, in *Work* it cripples the political life of those subject to its machinations, minimising the possibility of organising. When Balla tells Diarra to try to be at the workers' meeting, Diarra, covered in dye and sweat, responds with "I'm too tired". The difference in their embodied experience of the same space is unmistakable thanks to the intense physicality of the scene, wherein Diarra's naked torso is glistening with sweat and inky black dye, while Balla stands unruffled in a crisp shirt. Cissé here perhaps highlights the paradox of educated, left-wing young Africans who want to be the vanguard of working class consciousness, yet cannot relate to their barriers to organising such as overwork. In the film's space of production (the factory), which is also Balla's space of class anxiety, we can observe the "development of underdevelopment" that marks the continuity of the spatial precepts of French colonialism (Deckard et al. 2015, 13), as those of Diarra's class must choose between two kinds of dangerous working conditions (factory or street). Simultaneously, in the character of Balla, we can see a particular class of Malians caught between a socially committed politics (Balla's friend fails, for instance, to convince him to leave the public sector) and the political realities of their white-collar jobs in a neocolonial nation-state. *Work's* spatial dynamics thus communicate some of the contradictions that characterise

a post-independence generation of educated youth, who are neither entering the workforce at the bottom rungs, nor are they part of the comprador bourgeoisie (which Balla's boss, Sissako, represents).

Cissé's camera then makes an aesthetic choice that is politically meaningful, initiating intimate close-ups of the unnamed labourers and their labours. This technique resurfaces throughout the rest of the film. The viewer's attention is directed to and held by sequences featuring the faces, hands and creations of the welders, dye makers, assemblers, weavers, printmakers, cotton spinners and machinists at Sissoko's factory. Walter Benjamin (1969), Bela Balázs (2010) and Gilles Deleuze (2013) amongst others have all described the affective power of the close-up, which is usually utilised to reveal hidden meaning, disclose a character's inner state, or encourage the viewer to look on an object or subject in a new light. However, Cissé's extreme close-ups (forehead to chin) foremost work in a way that Laura Marks has termed "haptic visuality" (2000). This describes a tactile connection that vision enables between the spectator and objects on film, where the eye functions as a faculty of touch to filmic moments that are particularly sensorial and embodied. The physicality of the workers' labours are foregrounded through these close-ups, where the sweat on their faces, the fumes of the machinery, hair texture, and the layer of red street dust on skin is discernible. An almost kinaesthetic experience for the viewer, they impart a heightened sense of what enduring such spaces and going through such motions does to the body.



Fig. 14: The workers of the city (Dir. Souleymane Cissé, 1978)

This technique is still spatial in nature: it constrains the cinematic frame on a face, which in turn eliminates its capacities of recording environment, context, and even temporal movement. Cissé is here almost demanding a kind of ground zero of mutual recognition from the viewer (*Fig. 14*). This is not proposed *instead of* but *alongside* presenting the viewer with the specific economic, political and social locations within which these people move, and are. We see the cotton being spun and the textiles being dyed in a flurry of dirty, agile hands; young men at the local mosque fidgeting with their *tasbīh*; and the *griots* using gestures to emphasise their oral storytelling.



Fig. 15: Faith, commodities, tradition and media (Dir. Souleymane Cissé, 1978)

Far from dehistoricising his setting or advocating some kind of purely sensory aesthetic, this use of close-ups to generate both haptic visuality and to record these physical, social or spiritual labours locates the production of neocolonial capitalism within these spaces, in tension with practices from Islam and West African traditions like those highlighted above (*Fig. 15*). In fact, the class-based nature of these activities and their locations are visually alluded to just prior to close-ups of these individuals and activities. Though medium and establishing shots that take in broader settings, like the street, the mosque courtyard, the factory floor, and the middle-class home, these close-ups are situated within their environments, wherein we can also see “the tendency of capital to invest itself in fixed spaces through which spatial practices are ordered, oriented towards the maximisation of profit and the (re)production of its own logic” (Krishnan 2018, 63). The cuts from an activity to close-ups of the people and objects it involved generates a sense of how these socio-spatial practices and the subjectivities of its participants are mutually constituted. Cissé maps these places entirely via the people

that make them what they are, and vice versa. Does the street or the griot come first? Would the mosque's courtyard be a mosque courtyard if the local men did not converse there in the shade as an imam counted his prayer beads? In *Work*, people thus neither uniformly internalise or reject the activities associated with production, i.e., with neocolonial capitalism's "realisation of space" (Balibar 1991, 89) for accumulation. This criss-crosses always with other logics that are delineating their own social spaces, and which capitalism may not entirely co-opt but does influence or transform, such as those of West African Islam. Cissé's formal choices communicate the intimate interwovenness of the subjective and systemic effects of neocolonial spatial strategies.

VIII

We can also turn to *Work*'s representation of the built urban environment to discern these strategies. The characteristics of an overlapping, at times ambiguous, but also a historicisable array of political and economic shifts are discernible in its representation of built spaces. The significance of urban architecture in *Work* is set against the context of half a century of French colonial spatial models and education that has imbued these phenomena with civilisational, historical, even ontological significance (Bissell 2011). The colonial and consequently the post-independence African city perpetuated a particular regime of visibility. As Rachel Langford elaborates, it was not enough to know that spatial distinctions existed, but "they had to be seen patently to exist in concrete space and time, and to give rise to a 'correct', desired form of spatial practice, which could be taught" (2005, 96). In a series of scenes where Balla enters an African Modernist building upon being summoned to boss Sissoko's office, height, distance, and shape, work with and through cinematic spatial phenomena such as negative space, camera panning and framing to suggest certain historical and economic frameworks for understanding this space.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ "Modernism" here describes this architecture in reference to Modernist aesthetic style, some characteristics of which include the reduction of design to essential forms and colours; simple horizontal and vertical elements; and an emphasis on functionality that often emerged from utopian and socialist visions. See also Robert Klanten and Sofia Borges (2016).



Fig. 16: The architecture of Independence (Dir. Souleymane Cissé, 1978)

As the camera pans over the futuristic lines and boxy concrete shapes of the building's exterior, we occasionally lose Balla as the camera takes a wide shot and its movements cease to be prompted by the subject of its frame (*Fig. 16*). The African Modernist architecture that overwhelms him carries political and economic meaning itself, in both its conceptual sense and its material implementation in post-independence Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Zambia, Ghana and Senegal. The often daring designs of these parliament buildings, universities, central banks, independence memorials and stadiums are frequently held up as indication of the "forward-looking spirit that was dominant in these countries at the time",⁶⁰ but they also evidence the contradictions and dilemmas experienced both within pan-African organising and the nation-building processes of postcolonial states.

For one, their aesthetic boldness did not necessarily extend to a radical re-imagining of the powers they housed, or the societies they served. Some economic growth (in GDP terms) following independence from colonialism in West Africa did coincide with this radical architectural aesthetic, but know-how did not. Building designs and architects were often imported from outside the continent, with only a handful of the latter African, like the Senegalese architects Cheikh N'Gom and Pierre Goudiaby Atepa. By the second decade of independence, when *Work* is set, these buildings could serve as visual reminders of an aborted future. However, they were also

⁶⁰ So stated the brochure of the 2015 exhibition dedicated to African Modernist architecture, "Architecture of Independence", at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein. This is an example of the oversimplification still rife in approaching the study of this architectural heritage, where claims to its reflecting the "arrival" of Africa into modernity continue to be made uncritically.

inscribed, by the city's own inhabitants, as sites of political resistance to the very regimes trying to frame them as indicators of their nation being open for Western business. Manthia Diawara recalls an anti-capitalist march on the National Assembly building in Bamako in 1969 in response to the Traoré military regime, which had begun to promise Malians that “once everything was privatised, the French, the Americans, the World Bank, and the IMF would help us” (Diawara 2003, 70). In another event that took place in the national football stadium that same year, Diawara recalls how Alpha O. Konaré (later President of Mali from 1992–2002) stood up in public to sing the national anthem, denounce Traoré's privatisation plans, and hand in his resignation. This kind of “place-memory”, to recall Paul Connerton's term (2009), charges these public urban spaces through their political symbolism. The march on the Assembly and the civic disobedience in the stadium in 1969 gave these built environments a new, collective place-memory, which existed in tension with the goings on *inside* these buildings (the turning of the bureaucratic cogs of neocolonialism). In that tension between symbolism and spatio-economic function, these places could also be environments of political education for citizens whenever they were “hijacked” by the people for whom they had allegedly been built.

The architecture in *Work* serves to shroud boss Sissoko in layers of protective concrete and corporate impunity; as the camera glides aimlessly over the building's surfaces rather than follow Balla's progress inside in real-time, the viewer is kept locked outside with the people Sissoko professes to serve. This contradiction that Cissé generates through place opens up broader questions of modernisation, particularly vis-à-vis its historically particular – namely, imperialist – formation. Modernisation never was, nor is, entirely what various metanarratives have designated it to be, as an array of scholarship has shown (Parry 2002; Ingham and Warren 2003; Dirlik 1997).⁶¹ While acknowledging that “a preoccupation with the local that leaves the global outside of its

⁶¹ I use “modernisation” to refer to processes of the liberalisation of markets and their incorporation into Euro-American capitalism, and its attendant epistemological assumptions of Eurocentrism, manifest in colonial narratives of “progress” upon a linear civilisational timeline. I understand “modernity”, concurring with Arif Dirlik, as “not a thing but a relationship”, which is nevertheless “a single modernity, of which there is a multiplicity of expressions and articulations” (Dirlik 2003, 289).

line of vision is vulnerable to manipulation at the hands of global capital, which of necessity commands a more comprehensive vision of a global totality” (Dirlik 1997, 467), reading the local as object of the operations of capital provides a broad context for inquiry into the sources and consequences of neocolonialism. *Work's* African Modernist spaces evoke, on the one hand, the metanarrative of modernisation, with its tendency to oppress the local and erase differences of location and history; on the other, they underline that *Work's* diverse spaces, and the subjectivities they engender, exist in some relation of dependency upon the operations of one world-system. The failed promise of revolutionary pan-African futures, its physical presence undeniable in the architectural form of the city's buildings of commerce, education, governance and entertainment, contrasts with the petty politics and profit-chasing going on inside them. That is not to say *Work* configures its characters' lived experiences of their environments as straightforwardly allegorical distillations of world-systemic currents or events, but the film's representation of the built environment does attend to the relationship between neocolonial space and subjectivity.

IX

This relationship grows increasingly clear as labour conditions begin to make Sissoko's workers conscious of the dependence of this wider structure of exploitation upon their productivity. Textiles, and the way they materially and symbolically function, relate these world-systemic processes to the formation of subjectivities in *Work*. At one and the same time, the film's textile factory provides local people with their livelihoods, absorbs them into parts of the global economy, and literally reproduces the nation and its national(ist) myths. For Mali, cotton is indelibly tied to survival. As one of two key commodities for its economy then and today, Mali's cotton had already been or was on the cusp of being exposed to the volatility of world prices and the effects of American cotton subsidies around the time of *Work's* filming.⁶² Cissé's Mali was suspended

⁶² See also Roy (2010).

between French colonial economic structures, failed attempts at nationalisation, the military regime's over-confidence in the promise of multinational investments that had not yet materialised, and state and non-state actors pursuing agendas in service of American capital. The period saw General Traoré unleash a campaign of privatisation in order to encourage the latter, which included a particular accusation against the national factories for “draining the resources of the peasants, inducing drought, famine, and corruption” (Diawara 2003, 70). The cotton factory was thus a fraught terrain of national politics, and in the film it becomes a device that reveals this avowedly “national” space is actually of the world market. Mali's traditional cotton fabric, hand-dyed with fermented mud (*Bògòlanfini*), is sustainable. But the final product under Balla's supervision at the factory is a mass-produced and chemically dyed commemorative cloth. It features a man who resembles Jacques Foccart,⁶³ superimposed upon a map of Africa where Mali is distinguished in green.



Fig. 17: Monsieur Foccart (Dir. Souleymane Cissé, 1978)

As this striking detail captures, the factory, producing as it does physical marks of global and national events considered important indicators of the progress of nation-time, is a space that reproduces multiple and contrasting ideologies (*Fig. 17*). The cloth is depicted interspersed via a cut-reverse-cut technique with the dangerous and dirty process of its making, suggesting that the structure of production is such that the workers' labours for the nation are actually hastening the nation's economic bondage to

⁶³ Jacques Foccart played a central role in France's sphere of influence over its former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa in the sixties and seventies, facilitating covert operations like the assassination of the Cameroonian anti-colonial Marxist leader Félix-Roland Moumié, while at face value running “the so-called Secretariat of the Community, de Gaulle's attempt to find a structure halfway between colonies and full independence” (Whiteman 1997, 94).

France. Monsieur Foccart, one of the masterminds of this bondage, is honoured with a portrait.

Given *Work*'s historical context is a period of covert assimilation and overt coercion into one developmental agenda, such material details are crucial in linking the film's productive spaces to the reproduction of capitalism occurring at a world-systemic scale, as well as to the subjective. Clothing is the realm of the intimately local: of self-fashioning, self-presentation, socio-economic belonging, and identity signalling.⁶⁴ This latter relation is strengthened by what clothes designate more broadly in *Work*. In moments throughout the film, clothing functions as a tool for performing identity in and according to the requirements of neocolonial spatial logics – something we have seen Ousmane Sembène also explore in *Xala* (1975) in Chapter Three. Factory owner Sissoko is always shown in traditional *agbada*, but Cissé's script suggests there is no correlation between such displays of national pride and the actual manoeuvres of the post-independence elite. The son of an independence-era civil servant who laundered stolen public funds by setting up the factory, Sissoko's values begin and end with: "it's always best to clear one's debts with the government in order to work with a free hand". Balla, on the other hand, chooses his clothes according to his environment and his anticipated class interactions: an *agbada* to see boss Sissoko; a shirt and bell-bottom jeans at home and the factory.

Interesting intersections exist in Balla's sartorial choices that again illustrate links between the "world-ing" of Bamako's spaces and the subjectivities these spaces inform. The Malian generation coming of age a decade after independence like Balla's had grown up seeing much of the independence-era elite turn into opportunists dressed in the garb of tradition: certainly no longer the anti-colonial leaders that state-sanctioned narratives painted them out to be. This generation's resentments, as Diawara recalls from his own experiences, stemmed from a mixture of: difficulty of access to the Western counter-culture of the '70s; the comparatively more "open" economies of

⁶⁴ See also Rillon (2018).

neighbouring Senegal and Côte D'Ivoire; and the social authoritarian tendencies of the Keita then Traoré regimes. "I definitely did not like the neighbourhood policing, the curfews, and the imposition of Russian and Chinese in our school curriculum," Diawara recalls of '60s Mali (2003, 70). However, his generation had also "unconsciously absorbed the elements of independence as an everyday fact", and therefore did not welcome the military coup in 1968. General Traoré faced student protests from the late 1970s onwards (a topic Cissé explores after *Work* in his 1982 film *Finye*). Balla's sartorial choices suggest a generation straddling both this local Malian context and a "global long sixties" (Klimke and Nolan 2018) youth counter-culture.

While clothing is thus significant for individual subjectivities in *Work*, much of the film's emphasis on sartorial devices is also about the social and national performances they enable. As previously mentioned in the discussion of camerawork around architecture, Cissé is reluctant to visually prioritise any one character in ways that could suggest they are the subject of the story. However, through the materiality of his settings (especially textiles and clothing), Cissé's does come down quite clearly against the native elite class as a whole, demonstrating not only that they have reduced the more progressive possibilities of nationhood to mere outward appearances, but also fostered a culture of class aspiration and status-signalling through commodities. For example, when Balla and his wife M'Batoma dine with boss Sissoko and his wife Djeneba, they change to traditional dress, but find that the objects of Sissoko and Djeneba's bourgeois life are those of modern global capitalism with a touch of symbolic "Africa" thrown in. *Boubous* cut from imported cloth; a household whose cooks, nannies, and drivers are kept out of sight; and *fufu* and *jollof* rice paired with French wines. In another scene at a public restaurant, where Balla's friend gets drunk and rants at the bureaucrats in attendance, the elites' imported cloth is once again a loaded shorthand for the bribery that Balla's friend implies keeps Mali's public sector well-oiled. "Sitting there with your elegant clothes and your bald heads, acting like you own the world. It'll all come out soon in court!" he says. The significance of clothing yields itself through the context of the spaces it is in, communicating the political relation between raw material (cotton), the commodity (textile), and class signalling (the

ideological function of the commodity). *Work* brings out how the contradictions upon which post-independence neocolonialism rests – foreign debt with nationalism, local industry with unemployment – perpetuates empty culturalisms, as in Sissoko’s sartorial choices. However, the contradictions of this situation can also foster political consciousness, as the film’s ending suggests.

X

As *Work* moves towards its climax, it constructs its last and perhaps most compelling relation between place and the constitution of subjectivities. This relation operates through scenes that occur temporally simultaneously, which cut to and from two spaces that are explicitly political and explicitly gendered: the street and the bedroom. During the workers’ meeting that sets *Work*’s climax in motion, Sissoko’s informants lure Balla to his private office and strangle him. Indicating temporal simultaneity, we then cut to Sissoko, who is being taken home in his chauffeur-driven car; and then to Sissoko’s wife Djeneba, who is at that moment in bed with a lover. Sissoko comes home; the lover flees; and the couple have an argument. We cut to the street, where Balla’s wife M’Batoma has called at Sissoko’s mansion in the midst of the quarrel (presumably to see if Balla is there). Inside, the argument gets heated, with Djeneba holding the upper hand. She speaks what is to be her last truth to power in a striking, static mid-shot, where Cissé positions the camera slightly above her eye-level.



Fig. 18: Djeneba’s last words (Dir. Souleymane Cissé, 1978)

The technique uncomfortably places the audience in Sissoko's position, standing at the foot of the bed and looking down on a vulnerable but accusatory Djeneba (*Fig. 18*). "I know how you made your fortune. Your father, a small clerk, misused public funds, and you dare to brag about it," are her final words; Sissoko chokes her. The physicality of the murder; the prominence of Djeneba's body in its vulnerability; and the surrounding imported luxury brands (Marlboro cigarettes, Johnnie Walker whiskey) make this "private" crime profoundly public and political. Whereas the domestic setting of the murder could have enclosed Sissoko's act within the private sphere, he murders her not upon discovering the affair, but at her boldly voicing what everyone knows: that his political power is bought, his wealth stolen. Given what an integral role public and private spaces have together always played in constituting the gendered body,⁶⁵ for Djeneba to thus politicise the bedroom speaks to how "women face a form of hyper-exploitation under patriarchal, neoliberal capitalism" (Krishnan 2018, 120).

This is one of the two distinct but parallel-running exposés in the climax of *Work*, which until then had only hinted at the gendered foundations of the neocolonial spaces it uncovered. Indeed, Djeneba initially appeared to be a character defined through the bourgeois private spaces she moved through with an attitude of bored entitlement. Her reproductive responsibilities fulfilled (the three children off-loaded to female domestic help), the global commodities adorning her home had given off the impression she had the luxury of mobility. Yet the very systems of labour and subjection that bring into her home these luxury commodities is also revealed to be the system that murdered Balla, widowed M'Batoma, and transformed Djeneba first into trophy wife, then corpse. The governing systems (and with it, the spatial strategies) of post-independence Mali function through the violence of Western capital in collusion with the neocolonial state, which is always, in either case, also the patriarchal violence of the so-called private sphere. Given "the city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality", and that "the built environment provides the context for, and coordinates contemporary forms of, the body" (Grosz 1995, 104), for

⁶⁵ See also Elizabeth Grosz (1995).

Djeneba to use her last words to politicise the bedroom as an extension of the hypocrisy and violence of the neocolonial city brings home the political critique Cissé has been building, literally and figuratively.

This link is visually cemented once the climactic moment of the murder is overlaid with the fury of the factory workers and the image of M'Batoma collapsed by Balla's dead body.

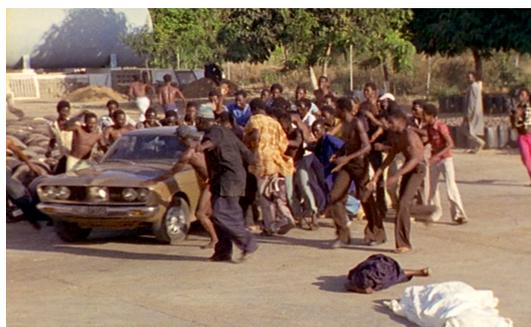


Fig. 19: Vigilante justice (Dir. Souleymane Cissé, 1978)

From protesting their subjection when given the space to do so, the workers now take away space from their subjugator, forming a human barrier to Sissoko's car as he tries to escape the police (*Fig. 19*). Sissoko is indeed half-saved, half-caught when he is arrested for the murder of Djeneba (only). In the end, despite some form of justice being served, Cissé returns for his final shots to facial close-ups of Diarra and his fellow factory workers, who are now on the streets awaiting casual employment. Despite this ambiguous ending, there is an unmistakable frustration to *Work's* climax that women (including elite African women like Djeneba) and workers suffer the brunt of the consequences of speaking truth to power. The film peels away the alleged distinctions of postcolonial urban environments – private/public, factory/street – to reveal that spatial strategies of neocolonialism are total but varied, and in collusion with class and gender lines. At the same time – and this is what makes Cissé a dialectical filmmaker indeed – in pursuing total spatial penetration, neocolonial capital lays itself open to the risk of cultivating political consciousness through its contradictions. As *Work* illustrates,

these latter become all the more clear in urban lived experience due to its multitude of everyday juxtapositions.

XI

Work cinematically maps an environment marked by accumulation and divestment, production and reproduction, while offering a way in which we can understand the relation between spaces and subjectivities in a postcolonial context. It asserts the existence of the workers' individual interiorities through its emotive close-ups of people and the work they do, while establishing a link between this collective activity and the subjectivities those actions form and reform in the process. In its particular attention to the material wealth that these spaces and labours create, it illustrates the economic hypocrisy of the supposedly socialist elite; via the architecture of Bamako, the film also charts the alternative futures that once presented themselves to West Africa. Their use as spaces for public dissent continues to challenge teleological narratives of global development and capitalist integration. While all these representational elements have demonstrated how neocolonialism tries to secure itself spatially, I have sought to demonstrate that *Work* also draws the viewer's attention to how these attempts inscribe themselves upon interiority, meeting with refusal or resistance therein. Cissé's film configures Bamako as a space of entanglements constituted by capital, but underpinned by what makes capital, in turn, possible: raw materials, manufactured into commodities by human labour. The human labours that turn this city into a nodal point within the world-system also generate consciousness of that system's flows, possibly also revealing when and where these flows may be disrupted.

Discussing two texts that foreground questions of place and space in this final chapter has also been a choice intended to highlight the fact that internal colonialism is a feature of the formerly colonised world. This is in many ways where the post-independence decades had brought Africa and South Asia by the mid-1980s.

Markandaya's 1950s India and Cissé's 1970s Mali both see "global and local capital, acting through nation-states in most cases, [encroach] ever more deeply into areas of the world still available as natural and human resources" (Loomba 2015, 255), as demonstrated by the symbolisms of raw materials (animal skins in *Nectar* and cotton in *Work*) within these two narratives. The field of postcolonial literary criticism, in its increasing intersection with ecocritical thought (James and Morel 2018), has come to understand and excavate not only how were people often regarded as part of this "raw material", but were coerced over time into viewing their environments, and their subjective and group relationships to it, through colonial views of the same. It has not often turned to post-independence texts, however, and even less to cinema, to trace the representation of these forces at work after independences from colonialism. *Nectar*, though an anomaly in Markandaya's writing (in that she never wrote a rural Indian setting again) was the novel that established her mid-century popularity in the US. *Work* was overshadowed by *Yeelen* (1987): Cissé's later, and altogether stylistically different, film. This chapter's discussion has not intended to flatten these and plenty more differences between the two texts, and cannot. Rather, it asks if and how a material conception of subjectivity allows us to read practices of resistance to the spatial logics of neocolonial capitalism. With both texts speaking to the mid-to-late twentieth century transition of postcolonial spaces into the global(ised) space of one world-system, their narratives movingly capture the different effects of this transition on subjectivities.

Conclusion

Sympathetic to historical materialist work in postcolonial studies, this study has nevertheless sought to address some of its omissions around subjectivity – a politically and conceptually urgent problem for a field whose *raison d'être*, despite its divergent approaches, is avowedly the critical interrogation of colonialism's formative influence on our world that is “shaped by the wars it propagated and the migrations that followed” (Boehmer 2020). A materialist approach to subjectivity – elucidated here through the thought of psychiatrist and anti-colonial philosopher Frantz Fanon – yields an under-considered but multi-faceted means by which to understand a query that is key to both these early postcolonial texts, and to the wider field: how, and why, structural decolonisation and the “decolonising of minds” (Ngũgĩ 1986) are intertwined.

Fanon's *Masks* (1956) and *Wretched* (1961) in particular allow for tracing the contours of the relationship between subjectivity and the conditions of independence and decolonisation, situating the subjectivity within a materialist worldview by understanding colonialism as both a systemic structuring of the world, as well as a discursive regime that has invented social categories like race (to be internalised in service of that structure). Elucidating from there the dialectical relation between the self and the world Fanon gestures towards, I have argued that this is a conception that holds subjectivity and material conditions as mutually effectual and co-constitutive. This is important because it is the theoretical basis of delineating and approaching the question of transformation at the levels of psyche, mind and interpersonal relations that so many leaders, thinkers and cultural producers of the global South in the era of anti-colonial resistance stressed as a decisive component of decolonisation. This project was expressed with differences in inflection, but consistently linked the creation of a new economy and society with the creation of a new person. For the revolutionary

Burkinabè leader Thomas Sankara, this meant the cultivation of self-worth and integrity, in conjunction with, and as a part of, the recognition of the dignity of oneself and others: “We have to recondition our people to accept themselves as they are, not to be ashamed of their real situation, to be satisfied with it, to glory in it, even,” (Sankara in Murrey 2018, 82). This popular refashioning is no substitute for radical material transformation – that is, the transformation of the mode of production, alongside the “shattering”, as Sankara stated (Murrey 82), of the administrative apparatus preserving the status quo in former colonies. But this popular “reconditioning” is a part of these political and economic processes, without which any material changes would be top-down and therefore easy to terminate or reverse. For Achebe, this “mental revolution” will “reconcile us to ourselves” (1975, 145), implying not the resolution of the material transformation yet to be done, but the confidence and the historical perspective that helps this work begin from a place of self knowledge and creativity rather than a place that has internalised the world as understood through colonialism and racism. For Fanon, who variously refers to this mental-material process as “disalienation” and the overcoming of the “inferiority complexes” instilled by colonialism, the process itself is simultaneously one of collective (and perhaps violent) anti-colonial resistance; of surviving and challenging colonialism’s material oppressions of hunger and dispossession; and of overcoming the psychic effects it instills in order to prevent the former two, such as social isolation, inertia, passivity, fear, lack of self worth and misdirected anger. All three in simultaneity is, for him, a process of becoming human – not because people who live(d) under (neo-)colonialism are not already human, or that anyone should have to overcome these conditions to become human, but because colonialism as a system of capitalist accumulation and exploitation is also a psychological and discursive one that informs the subjectivities of its victims and beneficiaries. In insisting that the “‘thing’ colonised becomes a man through the very process of liberation” (1961, 2), Fanon is also contending that colonialism is not composed of a structural and a psychological component, but that it is a total system whose machinations include the exercise of power over the formation of subjectivities in order to secure its own futurity.

In Chapters Two to Five, I have attempted to demonstrate how this Fanonian approach to subjectivity proves a singularly revealing and polytonal theme for reading eight post-independence African and South Asian texts. The relation between interiority and objective social location is a consistent political and philosophical concern in the novels and films examined within this thesis. It undergirds and enriches the various settings, narratives and themes they take up – from the popular damage the identity crises of the native elite can do in *Xala*, to the historical causes of psychic suffering within *The Cloud-Capped Star*. This relationality underscores the political and historical questions these texts ask – such as why the promises of independence failed to materialise – and it illustrates the cognitive component of the experiences of social subjects. It relatedly also demonstrates the political potential of subjective experience, which is not just arbitrary emotion. The lived experience of their everyday conditions enables the characters in the above texts to “know” the contradictions of their material realities, which reveal to them their own colonial and/or neocolonial circumstances.

A comparative approach that considers literary and cinematic texts together is particularly conducive to foregrounding this relationship for both aesthetic and historical reasons. Resonating with Fredric Jameson’s controversial but well-founded description (1986) of Third World literatures as (in all their diversity) nevertheless frequently possessing a consciousness of nation as a site of unrealised potentiality, Vilashini Cooppan draws attention to how “the postcolonial novel has a particular capacity to capture the multiplicity of time, place, and language that is the peculiar cast of the postcolonial nation, in which liberation is still an unfinished project and loss remains the nation’s dominant mode” (2009, xxi). The novels above indeed have simultaneously a temporal proximity to the peak periods of the energies of liberation in South Asia, West and East Africa (being written within a decade or two of their respective national independences), while also illustrating their nations’ political distance from the futures originally envisioned by the more revolutionary and radical impulses in its recent past. Such a “multiplicity of time” (Cooppan xxi), which is also a multiplicity of losses and hopes, manifests in the novels *A Grain of Wheat*, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Destination Biafra* and *Nectar in a Sieve* primarily

through the representation of a range of subjective effects in close causation with material conditions in post-independence Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and India, respectively. This necessarily means frequent refrain to the interiorities of characters, wherein such effects play out, influencing their thoughts and actions throughout the plot. These harness formal techniques such as multiple temporalities in *Beautiful Ones*, which underlines the disorientation experienced by Armah's protagonist who feels daily torn between the easy appeal of "the gleam" on the one hand, and the memory of "the promise" that was "so beautiful" (Armah 1969, 100) – liberation – on the other. Others like Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* reach for point of view narration and testimony to ask questions of the gendered politics around war historiography.

This aesthetic move works towards uncovering the relation between subjectivity and material conditions in cinematic texts as well. In the films *Home and the World*, *Cloud-Capped Star*, *Xala* and *Work*, the formal tools particular to the visual medium come to the aid of dialogue and plot to foreground how the systemic oppressions of colonialism produce and reproduce themselves as the level of intersubjective relations (in interaction with structures like patriarchy that pre-exist, but are remade, by colonialism and capitalism). These include *Work*'s moments of "haptic visuality" (Marks 2000) through the extreme close-up; *Star*'s historicisation of nostalgic depression (as one of Partition's many oppressive consequences) through its expressive use of landscape, light and sound; *Xala*'s use of costume to critique the postcolonial elite's crises of subjectivity; *Home and the World*'s use of textile props to relate the forces of colonial production with the reproduction of gendered domestic space, and more besides.

These textual and cinematic practices in form and narrative draw our attention to subjectivity as that which has social and historical location. These locations, which are essentially the many "everydays" that these stories depict, are inscribed with the intersecting forces of neocolonialism, capitalism and patriarchy. These forces undercut and inform character interiority and setting in all of the texts considered above, which represent, through internal and interpersonal conflicts, the political nature of the

quotidian experiences they narrate. Ray's protagonist, for instance, enters a love triangle that irrevocably changes her marriage, but the gradual transformation of her political consciousness is what reveals the ongoing linkages between colonial capital, patriarchy and Indian nationalism in her particular time and place. Bimala's subjectivity, informed even if unconsciously by the everyday material surroundings of her upper caste Bengali household, is neither the politically blank slate her husband assumes, nor the ideal (in the Hegelian sense) realm of "feminine intuition" that her love interest Sandip thinks it to be. Ray's cinematic techniques for collapsing the gendered and gendering home/world binary underscores and enriches these plot dynamics, going beyond his Tagorean source material. This irresolution around gender surfaces also in Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat*, where women's subjectivities remain unincorporated into the dialectical relationship between political consciousness and history that the novel sets up. This provides a conceptual and narrative tension that, when examined as did Chapter Two, gestures towards two important questions for the novel's post-independence context (and indeed beyond): whether the experience of anti-colonial struggle truly did transform its participants towards the revolutionary consciousness needed to build society anew, and to what extent this same struggle was invested in the notion of restoring a particular kind of masculinity.

Subjectivity as that which is shaped by social and historical location is also of key interest to the critical work Armah's *Beautiful Ones* and Sembène's *Xala* do, but with greater emphasis on the unjust material consequences that this relationality – one that is warped and in crisis amongst the native elites in these texts – begets *en masse*. In *Beautiful Ones*, the transformation of Nkrumahism within the space of a few short years from a revolutionary promise to crony capitalism weighs heavy on the protagonist's sense of time and self. He cannot entertain progress and regress as distinct, for effects within and without are one and contradictory, leaving us with a sense of the fallibility of individuals in the face of the structural entrenchment of colonialism, as well as the fact that individuals can either perpetuate or change structures. *Xala* is markedly different in tone, but uses satire to draw a similarly weighty relationship between the consequences within and without of neocolonialism. The central allegory

of the film – the native elite as complicit against and/or unable to spearhead national decolonisation – also yields a structural analysis of the relationship between subjectivity and arrested decolonisation, illustrated by Sembène approach to three overlapping themes: self-fashioning, language, and land. These two West African texts assert, without illusions but with a deep attachment to the stakes, that only material subjectivities – daily grappling with the material and affective powers of neocolonial capitalism – can give rise to resistant subjects.

Although the subjective effects of neocolonial material conditions can perpetuate the very same, the knowledges that arise from these effects can also be objectively true – and sometimes they help in resisting the conditions themselves. As the discussion of Emecheta’s *Destination* in Chapter Four demonstrates, through a focus on the subjective experiences and collective knowledges of West African women at a time of civil war, the novel actually relies heavily on subjective points-of-view in order to posit that the gendered effects of the Nigerian Civil War is the lens whereby which *all* facets of the war can be understood – even and especially the latter’s macro causes in neocolonialism and petrocapiatalism. From there, the novel further consolidates its intervention into the politics of war historiography by representing how characters draw from practices that speak to a long history of West African women’s resistance. Meanwhile, the designation of the psychic as always already ahistorical is contested by Ghatak’s *Cloud-Capped Star*, wherein his snapshot of “life after arrival” narrativises Partition’s violent effects on subjectivities. In this way, *Cloud-Capped Star* both challenges the “communal madness” nationalist narrative (Pandey 2001, 45), as well as asserts that to tell of individual and collective psychic sufferings is to tell of the lasting material violence of impoverishment and dispossession under colonialism and nation formation. In both texts, the proximity of various kinds of violence (from the immediate sexual violence of civil war to the slow economic violence of refugeedom) brings into sharp focus how neocolonialism, in the forms of resource grabbing and border making, can turn interiority itself into a source of knowledge of its structural workings.

The contexts and contents of *Nectar* and *Work*, meanwhile, overlap upon the post-independence re-structuring of livelihoods, and the environments they depended on, to serve global market demands, as implemented by both the forces of European neocolonialism and their postcolonial governments under the appearance of national progress. As Chapter Five has elucidated, the relation between place and labour in the postcolonial nation-state's rural and urban spaces of production is another key investigation in understanding the materiality of subjectivity and its relationship to decolonisation. The bond between the character of Rukmani and her environment in Markandaya's novel is given form through its disruption, as the customary agricultural and social practices that help constitute the protagonist's subjectivity are transformed upon the penetration of her local economy by global market forces. The novel's spatio-subjective narrative methods, such as the environmental and interpersonal effects that the coming of an industrial tannery has on the land and between neighbours, delineate for the reader the contours of the emerging world-system and its imperatives of accumulation, as they variously undergird and undermine the national development underway in Rukmani's post-independence India. *Work*, too, maps an environment marked by accumulation and divestment, production and reproduction, offering a way in which we can understand the relation between spaces and subjectivities in its particular postcolonial context of urban Mali. In the film's attention to the material wealth that these spaces create, Cissé illustrates the dependence of a globalisation emerging in the late seventies on the labours of the same West African classes that French imperialism depended upon throughout "official" colonialism. But in also representing the political potential of African women speaking truth to power, and of labour organising – possibly aided by a politically conscious, university-educated youth (as exemplified by the character of Balla) – *Work* understands postcolonial space as ripe for private and public dissent, and full of challenges to teleological narratives of "development" after the independences.

In exposing the contradictions of capitalist – and in the case of these texts, neocolonial – reality, the everyday "permits the formulation of concrete problems of production... [including] how the social existence of human beings is produced"

(Lefebvre 1977, 23). This everyday, whether Ngũgĩ's Gĩkũyũ village of Thabai or Markandaya's unnamed South Indian town, exposes for the characters who daily experience its effects on their subjectivities those material processes shaping social existence – processes usually cloaked by colonialism, neocolonialism, nationalisms or postcolonial statecraft. Subjectivity therefore cannot be considered solely the realm of psychoanalysis and left un- or partially incorporated by a materialist postcolonial studies if it seeks to engage fully with the historical problem of why decolonisation was “arrested” (Jeyifo 1990) after the independences.

Alongside the historical reasons for this arrest in the forces of US imperialism, Cold War politics, European neocolonialism, civil wars, and the cultivation of economic dependency through the policies of the IMF and The World Bank, run the effects of these forces as they are lived and experienced by people. The effects of these forces on interiority, variously noted by Sankara, Achebe, Fanon and others as “mental colonisation” (Sankara in Murrey 2018), “inferiority complexes” (Fanon 1952), and a lack of “reconciliation with oneself” (Achebe 1975, 145), are taken seriously in the above-considered realist texts of the post-independence decades. They are situated within the geopolitical and historical reasons for the failure of the independences in delivering liberation. For, as Césaire argues when he says that “people know better than anyone what they need, they know it from within, and they know that all creation, because it is creative, is participation in a combat for liberation” (Césaire 1959, 127), the creation of narrative is an act that draws out what is “known” from “within”. In other words, it has the ability to draw on those “things that continue unsatisfied inside” (Armah 1969, 100) to imagine the kind of world that is desired instead. That inner work both makes possible, and changes in tandem with, the material struggles of formerly colonised peoples the world over who continue to seek justice.

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