

Global Fantasy — Glocal Imagination

The New Literatures in English and their Fantastic ImagiNations

AS MY CUE I TAKE THE WORD 'imagination' and aim to explore its power to transcend borders: borders drawn on maps separating one nation state from another; the border that writers and readers deal with in their task (or need) to distinguish between the world 'out there' and the border that finds expression and is re-



presented through the artist's creative use of the word, but also as it is realized in the act of reading; the border within that imagined world that separates what we refer to as 'realist' or mimetic in the sense of its imaginary mirroring of the world 'out there' from the fantasized world that finds little or perhaps no correspondence whatsoever even to the mirrored world 'out there'. In short, the fantastic. It is a realm that invites comparison with the world of dreams, although the fantastic and the dream differ structurally. While the former is as much subjected to our basic perceptions of the 'real' grounded in time, space and causality, the latter is just as bereft of them: to understand it requires access through dream analysis.

Of course, different though the world of fantasy may be from our perceptions of the 'real' world, we cannot ultimately devise a world populated by beings and brought alive by their action and interaction beyond the border of our sensual perceptions, of our experience of the world 'out there'. Fantastic stories may be as far removed from our reality as we can imagine, yet they are still based on and controlled by overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility. In other words, they invert elements of this world.¹ Distinctions, however, can be made depending on the distance created between the 'here' and the 'there', and this becomes

1 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London & New York: Methuen 1981, 8

obvious when we think of examples of fantastic writing. The world of *The Lord of the Rings* is populated by strange creatures but also by beings who share many features with human beings in our world; so does its moral value system, its location and topography and the causality of its dramatic actions. Much further removed is Amos Tutuola's world of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* where logic, space and time assume fantastic dimensions and differ substantially from our understanding of their functioning.

But let me return to the question of border (and border crossing) with the implicit presupposition of the co-existence of two neighbouring realms or worlds, a co-existence along the temporal axis depending on whether both worlds are located in the 'here-and-now', in the present and the past or in the present and the future. It would be quite exceptional to encounter them exclusively in the past and the future, which in turn underlines the importance accorded to the present in fantastic writing: an option that suggests that past or future are imagined extensions of the 'here and now'. Spatially speaking, the coexistence of the two worlds may be as closely distanced as noted in *The Lord of the Rings* or as far away as outer space or the imagined-'underworld'. Finally, a special type of spatial coexistence is to be found in the bordering of our state of consciousness with our subconscious mind.

Now, as far as border crossing goes the fantasy writer has the choice of several narrative and dramatizing strategies usually at the same time. He might devise one or several fictitious characters to voluntarily set out and pursue a particular aim thereby creating one or more active agents. But the story's actors might also turn out to be the means or tools of their creator meant to achieve a certain end. Finally, their actions may be enforced on them by the power of an 'invisible hand' that leaves them little room to act other than by being driven to it. Freely stepping across a frontier sets in motion the dramatic action in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-wine Tapster in the Deads' Town* (1952), in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1997), or in Witi Ihimaera's *Sky Dancer* (2003). Yet it is on the suggestion of a guiding power that James Cook enters the underworld in Robert Sullivan's poem *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (2002). The protagonists in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1973) and Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants* (1988) are forced to step into the world of their subconscious while the young photographer in Mukul Kesavan's *Looking through Glass* (1995) finds himself back in the historical consciousness of his nation.

As to what fantasy writing is supposed to achieve, opinions range from

the view that it attempts to “compensate for a lack resulting from cultural restraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss”, as Rosemary Jackson states,² or Claude Lévi-Strauss who talks of the fantastic as a compensation man provides for himself, “at the level of imagination [...] for what he has lost at the level of faith”,³ to finally, Jean Paul Sartre for whom it functions as transforming man’s world.

Irrespective of the reasons for choosing a specific narrative strategy, however, the more basic question that interests me here is why these and other novelists of the New Literatures in English have moved into the world of the fantastic. Are they merely subjectively inclined to imaginatively create a world removed from their own immediate experience? Or are they keen to attract their readers’ curiosity for the unknown, the mysterious and wonderful, the magical and the horrible? And do they do so to introduce us to their own culture-bound material — legends, myths, fairy tales — to awaken or reawaken interest in their own perhaps suppressed or forgotten culture, thus implicitly constructing their discrete ‘imagiNations’? Here then they would part company from realist narrativation that had been part of the colonial baggage so many writers had been burdened with as the literary mode and model to follow.

These and more suggestions offer themselves when we focus our attention on fantasy writing in the New Literatures in English, examples of which we encounter mainly in the novel, but also in stories and plays and at times even in poetry. Some of them, especially more recent publications, have been paid critical attention under the rubric of magic realism, while a few texts have been categorized as signifying a “postmodernism of resistance”,⁴ postrealist⁵ or dystopic writing.⁶

Preceding these latter notions, Stephen Slemon suggested earlier to work out a clearer concept of magic realism in a post-colonial context in order to perhaps establish a basis for comparing texts from separate post-colonial cultures.⁷ For my purpose several of his findings and conclusions

2 Ibid., 3

3 Ibid., 18

4 Juniper Ellis, “A Postmodernism of Resistance: Albert Wendt’s *Black Rainbow*”, *Ariel* 25, 4 (1994), 101–114; here 194

5 Elizabeth DeLoughery, “Towards a Post-Native Aiga: Albert Wendt’s *Black Rainbow*”, eds. James N. Brown and Patricia M. Sant. Commock, *Indigeneity: Construction and Re/Presentation*, N.Y.: Nova Science Publications 1999, 137–158; here 150

6 Ibid., 153, 158

7 Stephen Slemon, “Magic Realism as Post-colonial Discourse”, *Canadian Literature* 116 (1988), 9–24; here 10

are useful because they might be confirmed in my broader approach of looking at fantasy writing generally of which magic realism is one of several sub-genres. Thus it will be interesting to see, first, whether it is generally true that we are dealing here with a post-colonial discourse where silenced voices are recuperated, where marginalized presences “press in toward the centre” so that the site of a text “is a localized region that is metonymic of the post-colonial culture as a whole.”⁸ Yet as such references to post-colonial culture presuppose the existence of texts written in English in “cultures situated at the fringes of mainstream literary traditions”, and accordingly perceive of magic realism “as a literary practice [that seems] to be closely linked with a perception of ‘living on the margins’”,⁹ I would like to ask whether under conditions of globalization we can still conceive of the New Literatures in English along the trajectories of the binary model of centre and margin. In fact, Sudeep Dasgupta has argued that

[g]lobalization [...] involves a retheorization not just of the ‘location of culture’ (Bhabha 1994), but [sic!] the very onto-epistemological foundations that conceptualized ‘culture’ according to the binarisms of East/West, Self/Other, Civilized/Barbarian.¹⁰

I suggest then to place these literatures into the context of the transglobal multiple exchanges of global and local factors that encompass economic, social and political aspects as much as cultural ones. Their coming together, for example, in the formation of creolized texts, texts I prefer to call ‘glocal’, will hardly permit us any longer to decipher a dialectic process of central pressure and marginal resistance,¹¹ let alone, its specific version of ‘writing back to the centre’. Let us then leave behind, abandon, the term post-colonial and conceive of the New Literatures in English as glocal literary discourse from where I would like to set out and probe into

8 Ibid., 20

9 Ibid., 10

10 Sudeep Dasgupta, “Topologies of Nationalism: Constructing the ‘Native’ Between the Local and the Global”, eds. James N. Brown and Patricia M. Sant. Commock, *Indigeneity: Construction and Re/Presentation*, N.Y.: Nova Science Publications 1999, 77–94; here 91

11 For further references to theoretical reflections on glocal culture and glocal literary discourse cf. Dieter Riemenschneider, “Contemporary Māori Cultural Practice: From Biculturalism Towards a Glocal Culture”, eds. Dieter Kastovsky, Gunther Kaltenböck, Susanne Reichl, *Anglistentag 2001 Wien: Proceedings*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag 2002, 133–145; and Dieter Riemenschneider, “‘Nga tipuna ki mua. Ko tatou kei muri — The ancestors in front, we are behind’, Māori Contemporary Theatre: Witi Ihimaera: *Woman Far Walking* (2000)”, eds. Hans-Ulrich Mohr and Kerstin Mächler, *Extending the Code: New Forms of Dramatic and Theatrical Expression*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag 2004, 211–223

specimens of fantasy writing, literary representations that transcend the realist mode, the mimetic, to differing degrees, either by leaving it totally aside or by mixing, juxtaposing or contrasting it with the fantastic mode.

Before exploring a few examples, an important reservation should be made to avoid the erroneous conclusion that all New English language texts fall under this category. On the contrary. As mentioned briefly, the narrative mode of its large majority, especially during the initial phases of setting up discrete national literatures, has been realist to a degree that critics at the time, admittedly, taking up an extreme position, have either castigated for its all too obvious descriptive-ethnological or its non-literary political-propagandist nature or, in reverse, praised for its unequivocal anticolonial and national cultural stance.¹² More recently, however, Georg Lukács's theoretical reflections on the bourgeois novel seem to have reappeared on the scene, though indirectly and modified from the angle of postmodernist thinking. Elizabeth DeLoughery, for example, argues in her analysis of Albert Wendt's novel *Black Rainbow* (1992) that "for a writer invested in recovering suppressed histories, the genre of realism may limit this effort due to its similarity to capitalist teleology."¹³ Whether we speak of "similarity" here or of Lucien Goldmann's 'homology', the interesting point is that DeLoughery suggests the employment of an 'other' than the realist narrative mode to pursue the recovering of one's own history outside the capitalist framework.

Could considerations of this nature then serve us as a guiding principle in our investigation of fantasy writing in the New Literatures in English? I leave the question unanswered at this point and instead turn to a few examples chosen at random from among more recent publications of Māori and Indian writers. What are their fantastically imagined worlds, what are their fantasy narratives like? Who are the agents crossing over into the other realm and what effects have their actions there on the realistically represented world of the 'here and now' that usually also plays its part in constituting the literary discourse? And finally, does the fantastic narrative mode construct 'imagiNations' of a transnational nature? In other words, does it form part of a glocal literary discourse as a post post-colonial literature? It may not be coincidental that we come across quite a few

12 Lucie Armitt's remark that "literary modes which are anti-realist and pro-fantastic have often been considered more frivolous than the mimetic" (2) may very well apply here, especially under the aegis of constructing an anti-colonial national literary discourse. Examples are indeed rare among early Indian, Caribbean or African writing in English. See Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), G.V. Desani, *All about H Hatterr* (1948), or the writing by Amos Tutuola in the 1950s and 1960s. See Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, London: Arnold 1996

13 DeLoughery, *op.cit.*, 153

examples of a sustained fabulist or fantastic narrative mode in Māori and Pacific writing on the one hand and literature of the diaspora on the other, and I would venture to maintain that in both cases the need to construct ‘imaginary homelands’ is stronger here than for writers who are living ‘at home’. Do Māori and Pacific authors then not live at home? Yes and no, as their fantastic writings document.

The main action in Witi Ihimaera’s most recent novel *Sky Dancer* (2003) is fantastically transferred to the world of birds and centres on the violent struggle fought out between sea and land birds for the dominance of the land and the forest, rivers and lakes. A Māori couple, Skylark and Arnie, are sent by two *kuia*, old women guardians of the forest, to assist the land birds. Thanks to magic and their technical acumen they succeed in entering the fantastic world and in defending the land birds’ right to claim their territory, with one of the old guardians sacrificing her human existence in the act of rescuing Skylark from being ‘bird eaten’ alive and humanity in general, by pulling the ripped sky together and thus preventing sea birds from ever re-entering the fantastic realm of the land birds.

Space does not permit me to go into the dense texture of this story with its multiple shifts of mode and tone, its well-structured dramatization and manifold intertextual references to Māori myths as well as to canonized Western texts like the Bible and the medieval epic or to globally disseminated media events such as musicals and action-films. From the beginning the fantastic mode runs through the realist narrative as the uncanny threat of the sea shags to kill Skylark, whom they identify as the potential saviour of the land birds according to a prophecy they have come to know. Yet we are not dealing with a Māori version of the uncanny in the sense of repressed subjective anxieties and drives as in Hitchcock’s film *The Birds* but with a subgenre Tzvetan Todorov has called “the fantastic uncanny”.¹⁴ It presents itself as the metamorphosed historical struggle where the owners of the land, Aotearoa, are threatened by invaders from across the sea. While the former have to atone for their vanity that had dismayed their guardian god Tane, Māori Lord of the Great Forest, the latter are driven by avarice and the quest for domination, embodied in their leader of the sea shags, Kawanatanga.¹⁵

The crossing of the border into the fantasy world of the birds thus is

¹⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, tr. by Richard Howard, Cleveland/London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University 1971, quoted in Jackson, *op.cit.*, 4

¹⁵ A term coined in the early 19th century and used in the Treaty of Waitangi, 1840, signifying the British ‘governor’s rule’ in New Zealand, by contrast to the term ‘rangatiratanga’, or chiefly sovereignty, which the Māori believed they did not yield to the British Crown in the document

a morally motivated, rational and wilful act aimed at self-preservation because saving the world of the land birds means saving humanity. The metamorphosis Skylark and Arnie undergo, their change into birds once they have entered the other world through the Time Portal, and the ensuing bird battle they participate in, turn the story into a heroic fantasy that allegorizes the historical Māori-Pākehā struggle endowing it with a teleological purpose. More importantly, the human-bird agents possess the capabilities of cyborgs moving and manoeuvring like spacecrafts through a spectral region of the fantastic that is intrinsic to the world of science fiction and thus informed and constructed by globally shared fantasy imaginations. Multiple references at the realist level of the story, on the other hand, firmly anchor all characters, with the possible exemption of the two *kuia*, to the everyday world with all its modern and globally available technical and media gadgets, attitudes and views, where a discrete Māori culture has vanished even in small town settlements like Tuapa, somewhere on the South Island. In this sense, Māori are indeed no longer ‘at home’, yet as the fantastic story testifies, their striving for ‘home’, or more precisely, enacting their close relationship to the land results in re-establishing their tangible and spiritual ‘home’ when Skylark takes over the guardianship from her aunts. However, it is now a place where asserting their own culture stands for accepting the trusteeship of the land not merely as a national ethnic task but a global ecological responsibility. Here then Skylark and Arnie’s excursion into the fantasy world shows its bearings on the real world where local priorities transform into and assume a global dimension by fusing them with global concerns thus creating what I like to call a transnational imagiNation.

Is it through fantasy writing, then, that *the tangible glocality of culture* is given more adequate literary representation than the realist literary discourse can achieve? DeLoughery’s thesis of the “realist, nation-building novel”,¹⁶ I believe, has to be reconsidered in the light of *Sky Dancer* and other literary texts where both literary modes are employed and where we must ask what different functions they serve within the narrative as a whole. In Ihimaera’s novel the fantastic section, though it makes up only a third of the story, dominates, and so it does in Wendt’s *Black Rainbow*. Perhaps even more unequivocally so as DeLoughery convincingly expounds. Yet what about diaspora writing, for example Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*¹⁷ or Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*?

16 DeLoughery, *op.cit.*, 152

17 Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, London: Doubleday 1997

Being asked about her first novel, Divakaruni obviously reverted to Salman Rushdie's rejoinder to the critique of *The Satanic Verses* in the late 1980s that it was the novelist's duty to take risks, to push boundaries; boundaries that separate communities and people, as Divakaruni says, and that we create in our own lives. Indeed, to overcome them is the novel's central concern; this rules Tillottoma's life and her relationship with her customers, among whom we meet people from India, the Caribbean, Afro-Americans and Native Americans. Yet though *The Mistress of Spices* is dominantly a realist story about everyday life in a part of Oakland, the Indian protagonist is deeply anchored to the fantastic world of "the island of spice" situated somewhere in the wide expanse of the globe's ocean world. Here she arrived as a young woman who had partly willed voluntarily to run away from home through the power of her "calling thought"¹⁸ that "had set into motion a juggernaut wheel whose turning even I could not arrest"¹⁹ and made her join those pirates that had devastated her home village and killed its inhabitants. And yet, tired of her life as the pirates' queen after a few years and encountering the fantastic sea serpents who tell her about the island and how to find it, it is again her own decision to move there because "it seemed that I had finally found a name for my wanting."²⁰

As with *Sky Dancer* a fantasy strain runs through the whole narrative, yet it is not tangibly co-present but evoked through the first person narrator's memories and the occasional words, mainly of warning, spoken by the inner voice of the Old One who had taught Tillottoma and other young women about the healing power of the spices their customers were to administer, to whom they would sell turmeric, cinnamon, fennel or pepper corn. Thus it is the bearings the spice mistresses' acquired knowledge have on the 'here and now' that are foregrounded with the purpose of healing, that is, of transcending the manifold boundaries that separate human beings. In contrast to Ihimaera and Wendt's novels where a temporary rapprochement appears to have been achieved — although a utopian world is by no means envisaged — Divakaruni's story relegates the fantasy world eventually to the background because its perfect moral nature cannot be reconciled with the imperfect world the mistresses of spices are working in. Symptomatically, Tillottoma's human desires, falling in love, thinking of her own happiness and removing herself from the power of the spices, testify to the unbridgeability of the real world and

18 Ibid., 17

19 Ibid., 19

20 Ibid., 24

the fantastic paradise. Her new name Maya encapsulates the “[i]llusion, spell, enchantment, power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day”²¹ and it is a multicultural imagiNated world that she will continue to help overcome its boundaries and fissures. In this sense the fantastic world of the island of spices has served its function of teaching her “that some things are more important than one’s own joy”.²²

As a rather different approach to fantasy writing Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*²³ presents us with an intellectually challenging text where border crossing into the world of fantasy takes the form of multiple metamorphoses among a group of characters. Their identity remains as fluid as the purpose of their actions eventually remains a matter of speculation, as suggested by the protagonist Murugan whose own enigmatic disappearance sets off the story. Again, I cannot delve into the intricate wealth of the action set variously in the New York flat of Antar, a retired Egyptian computer employee of the International Water Council on 20 and 21 August in the first decade of the new millennium and in Calcutta on the very same days in 1995.²⁴ While Antar’s story of solving the riddle of Murugan — his former colleague who has disappeared from Calcutta — is situated at the realist narrative level, Murugan’s quest for the Calcutta chromosome increasingly incorporates fantastic elements. I want to mention only the repeated and uncanny appearances of a young man, the role that a mysterious railway station, its station master and a night train play at a desolate place some 300 miles outside Calcutta that is obviously connected with the disappearance of several people; further, an eerie night ritual in a derelict house or the unannounced and sudden removal of Murugan’s landlady who disappears with her tenant’s belongings.

21 Ibid., 317

22 Ibid., 315. It may not be inopportune here to comment briefly on Witi Ihimaera’s play *Woman Far Walking*, Wellington: Huia Publishers 2000, with its reversal of the fantastic as presence and the past as real, enacted by the 160 year old Tiriti and her younger alter ego Tilly — the fantastically ancient metamorphosed Tiriti (or Treaty) of Waitangi and her similarly metamorphosed guilt feelings — who are made to dramatically present the history of Māori people under colonialism, including their own complicity in the violent colonizing process. The re-enactment of key experiences at the fantastic level of the play’s presence cleanses Tiriti’s mind in order to overcome her grief and accept her own guilt: A reading of *Woman Far Walking* that underlines the power of the fantastic imagination to question the binary of ‘them’ and ‘us’ and accept their coming together in the sense that Tiri’s son of a Pākehā father had joined both sides. See Riemenschneider, *op.cit.*, 2004

23 Amitav Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*. New York: Avon Books 1997

24 A similar juxtaposition of the future and the past serves Ruchir Joshi in his dystopian historical novel *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*, London: Harper Collins 2001, to thematize quite the opposite of Ghosh’s vaguely optimistic outlook by insisting that there are no more new helpful prayers. Story telling is merely to show “ki unhone kya kya, kya kya nahi kio.”

Hints towards an understanding of these and other strange goings-on, I believe, are conveyed through Murugan's speculations about the existence of a group of Indian people pursuing, he feels, a counter-science whose first principle is secrecy. They would refuse direct communication about their research on malaria and on a "technique of transmission, the crossover from one soul to another, a technology for interpersonal transference", as Sandra Ponzanesi puts it.²⁵ In other words, they would refuse communication with others because to put ideas into language "would establish a claim to know which is the first thing a counter-science would dispute."²⁶ This is an idea Murugan connects with his own investigation into the development of malaria research in the 19th century.

For our purposes of enquiring into the nature of the fantastic world, its agents and the bearings their actions have on the 'here and now', I propose, first of all, that it is Murugan's assumption of the existence of a secretive counter-science in India that compels the story's narrator to endow the characters his protagonist meets in Calcutta as well as incidents that befall both of him and them with a fantastic aura of secrecy and indeterminacy which implicitly relativizes the certainty of knowledge obtained rationally and technologically. Secondly, and more importantly, I believe, that Murugan's thesis "that to know something is to change it, therefore in knowing something, you've already changed what you think you know so you don't really know it at all: you only know its history",²⁷ relates to the Hindu philosophical concept of silence and the word or truth and non-truth. The truth, in words only graspable by defining it negatively as 'not this not that', *neti neti*, becomes its opposite, that is non-truth, when silence is translated into sound. Thus, to name is to know, but to know is not to know the truth and in that sense knowledge has changed the truth.²⁸

If this is a tenable reading of the novel's subtext, then its narrativistic representation must necessarily exclude closure: a conclusion not altogether wrong when we look at the unresolved though surmised riddle of what the Calcutta chromosome is actually all about. Urmila, a young woman who is increasingly drawn into Murugan's quest, wonders about her own role which constrains him to admit that he neither knows what 'they' want

25 Sandra Ponzanesi, "Diasporic [Narratives@Home](#) Pages: The Future as Virtually Located", ed. Gerhard Stilz, *Colonies — Missions — Cultures in the English-speaking World*, Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag 2001, 396-406; here 403

26 Ghosh, *op.cit.*, 195

27 *Ibid.*, 105

28 Thomas Huttunen argues similarly on 'silence' though not with reference to Hindu thinking. See Thomas Huttunen, "Narration and Silence in the Works of Amitav Ghosh"; *WLWE* 38, 2 (2000), 28-43; here 37-38, 41-42

to change and why nor which role he and the young woman and perhaps others are made to play in ‘their game’. At the most, Murugan suggests, you can only assume that they will disclose their knowledge when a new technology has arrived “to deliver their story.”²⁹

Is this the case when the story is brought to an end, returning us to Antar in front of his computer where Murugan suddenly materializes cybernetically in identically the way he had turned up in Calcutta in 1995 and addresses Antar who is suddenly surrounded by voices telling him: “you’re not alone; we’ll help you across”?³⁰ We don’t know because we are not told, and thus the question whether the Calcutta chromosome has been discovered remains open. The fantastic mode employed here to “interrogat[e] single or unitary ways of seeing”,³¹ challenges our attempts at gaining the truth scientifically, even with the help of such highly developed technology as the AVA/IIe systems (4) Antar uses to search into the furthest recesses of virtual space reality to track down information, find answers to questions and solve puzzles. Yet at the same time the fantastic that enters Murugan’s life and is mediated through technology does not simply bring us back into our reality because the very existence of voices breaking the silence hints ambiguously at the promise of perhaps eventually finding the chromosome or naming the truth.³² The truth, I would argue, is presently being conceived of only philosophically as one-ness, as non-duality but perhaps one day made factual. The fantastic mode in *The Calcutta Chromosome* functions to explore the technological possibility of crossing the boundary between individual selves (as the narrative quite clearly manifests)³³ in a way that would erase constructs of individual and supra-individual identities; it thus postulates the creation of a glocal imagiNation.

I want to round off this short presentation with a few observations on a poetry collection and a long poem by the Māori writer Robert Sullivan. *Star Waka* (1999) with its one hundred poems unfolds the *waka*, the Polynesian boat, as their central metaphor that crosses the boundaries of time and space in manifold ways. Here, the poems create a poetical world where

29 Ghosh, *op.cit.*, 219

30 *Ibid.*, 311

31 Bakhtin quoted in Jackson, *op.cit.*, 36

32 See Ponzanesi, *op.cit.* Though I do not disagree, Ponzanesi’s use of the postcolonial writing-back paradigm ignores the novel’s sub-text which lends its fantastic mode a decisive role, thus underlining the powerful global function of imagiNation

33 For example, with Laakhan as Romen Haldar, Mangala as Mr. Aratouninan, Urmila as Tara or Sonali as Maria

global and local cultural elements no longer exclude each other. “waka 46”, for example, takes on board the purpose of travelling into outer space in the space-*waka* to set up a fantastically imagined world of reconciliation among nations and people,

no longer subject to peculiarities
of climate the political economies
of power and powerless

a space waka
rocketing to another orb
singing waiata to the spheres.³⁴

In *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (2002), representing the human endeavour of imagining the world of the dead, the voice of the poet is replaced by an interchange of chorus, crew and captain, historian and islanders and finally, Orpheus and Maui, as the text was originally commissioned as a libretto. Its first part foregrounds James Cook’s voice reconstructed from his journals describing his and his crew’s Pacific voyages. After his violent death he is then made to cross the boundary into the spirit world of the dead, joining “Orpheus at the lyre”³⁵ who helps him enter the world of souls, who according to Polynesian mythology are made to journey further on the earth before they can enter the next world. On their way they might encounter bad spirits, demons and the souls of others, as Sullivan’s poem indeed brings home. Subsequently the poet collapses the Greek and Polynesian mythic figures of Orpheus and Maui and relates Cook’s enforced journey through the South and North islands of New Zealand to the purgatorial journey in the *The Divine Comedy*.³⁶ However, its goal is not redemption but a challenge: the offer of “integrity by chance”,³⁷ or in other words: the chance for Cook to learn “so that your soul will stop its journeying.”³⁸ Having been confronted with the soul of a murdered Māori chief, Cook says that he understands his wrongdoings; however, he cannot make undone what has been done.

Captain Cook in the Underworld can be read as a postcolonial text in that it aims at recuperating from a Polynesian perspective the historical encounter of Cook and Polynesia, of the ‘disciplined’ British colonizer

34 Robert Sullivan, *Star Waka*, Auckland: Auckland University Press 1999, 50. See Riemenschneider 2002, 138–140, for a more extended reading of this poem

35 Robert Sullivan, *Captain Cook in the Underworld*, Auckland: Auckland University Press 2002, 34

36 See also the poem’s intertextual references to *The Inferno* (and, incidentally, S.T. Coleridge and Derek Walcott) facing the acknowledgement page

37 Sullivan, *op.cit.*, 2002, 36

38 *Ibid.*, 45

and “these almost men.”³⁹ Yet its portrayal of Cook’s learning process that will redeem him, not from his guilt but from his non-knowledge of Polynesia, transforms the text’s recuperative nature into an imagined rapprochement that crosses cultural boundary lines. Cook is not punished for his deeds, as both traditions would have it, the Christian exemplified in *The Divine Comedy* and the Māori that demands *utu* for the loss of his *mana*. Rather Orpheus/Maui let his spirit fly away into the next world admonishing it as much as conveying this lesson to the reader “to know this thing [... k]now anything!”⁴⁰ The fantasized discursive exchange between the collapsed mythic guide-figure and the Western explorer who has come to know — and is even revered in Polynesia as “divine Lono”⁴¹ — represents a glocal representation of a transcultural imagiNation: a literary discourse, as Sullivan’s poem and the other examples from the South Pacific and the Indian diaspora illustrate, that forms an essential part of the New Literatures in English. It distances it from the postcolonial literary discourse in a globalized world that is increasingly suffused with *glocal cultural representations* that cross national boundaries and challenge strategies of conceptualization along national borders.

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39 *Ibid.*, 29

40 *Ibid.*, 50

41 See Anne Salmond’s summarizing remarks in “Our Ancestor Captain Cook” (425–430) on Polynesian reverence of Cook that was brought to an end by American missionaries only during the 1840s and 1850s, in: Anne Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog: Captain Cook in the South Seas*, London: Penguin Books 2004

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