December 2015

Passing through the Cracks: Gossip and Subversion in Forster's A Passage to India and Sidhwa's Cracking India

Victoria Barnett-Woods
_The George Washington University, vab@gwmail.gwu.edu_

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard

Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss4/9)

**Recommended Citation**
Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss4/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Word Hoard by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwo.ca, wlswadmin@uwo.ca.
Passing through the Cracks: Gossip and Subversion in Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*

Victoria Barnett-Woods  
The George Washington University

Modes and methods of resistance in colonial and postcolonial literature, in their many manifestations, provide markers for scholarly interpretation and in-depth readings of a given work and its literary tradition. As an example, Anglo-Indian colonial novels at the turn of the twentieth century and even earlier tend to mark racial and ethnic resistance between colonized and colonizing subjects. In novels that come after formal decolonization—for the purposes of this essay, 1947 India—resistance in literature can appear in multiple forms and have multiple voices, not simply an exclusively Western-educated male voice of the time before partition. Since Edward Said’s seminal work, *Orientalism* (1979), literary theorists have meditated upon these markers of resistance and their signification within a work, implying its relationship to larger notions of nation, national identity, cultural consciousness, representations of gender, and many more. Homi K. Bhabha, in his *Location of Culture* (1994), considers colonial mimicry and the anxiety that it produces as an act of resistance. In *Politics of Translation* (1998), Gayatri Spivak remarks that translation both into and out of English can be seen as a mode of political resistance. Christopher Stroud, a linguist who specializes in polylingual code-switching in oppressed, developing, and post-colonized countries argues that meaning-construction through code-switching may be a “strategic means whereby speakers position themselves as agents of [either] resistance or compliance” (149). Stroud argues that code-switching can be seen as a subversive act; as a means for oppressed peoples to utilize the language of the oppressor, in addition to their own indigenous languages, in order to undermine colonial and neocolonial authority (164). Resistance is crucial to all of these scholars’ arguments—dense nodes of colonial and postcolonial linguistic and literary ambivalence are examined and argued about within the public spaces of intellectual inquiry.

For the purposes of this essay, a much closer examination of Bhabha’s theoretical apparatus for understanding modes of discursive resistance is essential to understanding my own position, particularly as I focus on the role that rumour plays in a colonial space. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha prolifically discusses the ambivalent nature of the relationships between the colonial and colonized subject and the colonial discourse that is produced based upon these
relationships. His definition of discourse, found in the essay “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” is “a recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences. Its predominant strategic function is the creation of space for a ‘subject peoples’ through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised” (100). In his essay, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” Bhabha argues that during the time of British occupied India, there were instances of cultural appropriation or mimicry that were supposedly desired by both colonizer and colonized (e.g. Macaulay’s Minutes). Colonized Indian subjects would mimic the behaviour, dress, and speech of the English as a method of acquiring status and economic stability during the occupation. While the colonizers appeared to have “desired” the colonized subjects to mirror their European customs and internalize the Western ideologies surrounding religion, politics, and the aesthetic, the “mimic man” presented a “double articulation” and a possible subversive threat to the imposed British authority. “Mimicry is thus … a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also a sign of the inappropriate … [a] recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power … and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (122). The undermining nature of the “mimic” destabilizes the imperialists’ set of values and epistemic systems of cultural identity, and is a moment of candid reflection of the arbitrary nature of elevating one system of knowledge over another.

Bhabha formulates a different understanding of the political and cultural exchanges between the colonial British and the colonized Indian; he argues that colonial discourse is fluid and decentered, entering between cycles of imperialist impositions and resistance. He also posits that there is a multiplicity of speech acts that are being communicated from either side of the dividing cultural/racial lines of asymmetrical power. While there is still an obvious political and cultural imbalance of dominance, the relationships between these two disparate cultures (British and Indian) are not clearly defined. When considering Bhabha’s connection between mimicry and hybridity of cultural value systems, lines of difference between the colonial and colonized subjects are blurred, and political resistance to colonial oppression becomes viable. Bhabha’s scholarship can be augmented by examining the ways in which gossip and rumour can be constructed as alternative and even dissident discourses to the Anglo-centric and hegemonic narratives of “imperialism” and “nation.” I too consider vernacular forms of dissidence, but in this case, with a more vernacular terminological framework. In using A Passage to India and Cracking India to augment the current circulating discussion, this essay both closely reads sites of anti-colonial and pluriversalizing gossip within these two novels, and attempts to articulate an argument about the need for considering gossip as a narrative strategy and politically subversive mode of discourse in Anglo-Indian and post-colonial literature. The examination of these two disparate but connected works will be used to address the following questions: what is the representative role of gossip in colonial
and postcolonial literature? Or, does reading gossip in highly politicized novels offer an alternative understanding of how the novels could be understood? This essay will argue that gossip in the canonical works of Forster and Sidhwa serves as a direct alternative discourse to both colonial and, in post-partition India, hegemonic nationalist rhetoric, complicating the hierarchical and stratified boundaries of dominance and submission. This discursive mode of resistance can be intertextually engaged, allowing for a new thematic thread to bind these two texts over the long history of British occupation in India, in addition to the broad literary legacy of South Asian writing that Sidhwa and Forster actively participate in.

Forster’s *A Passage to India* intricately engages with not only the narratives of nationhood, race, and imperialism, but also microscopically constructs individual stories of friendship that tend to counteract the macroscopic narrative teleologies of British imperialism. Amongst the countless dialogues and numerous interlocutors within the novel, gossip marks moments of both intimacy and revulsion between characters, and indirectly reflects the socio-cultural and political issues that Forster himself was grappling with during his own time abroad. One such sequence occurs toward the beginning of the novel, as the reader is attempting to understand how characters view themselves and their relationships with each other in the seemingly tense and uncertain surrounding environment of Chandrapore. In preparing to meet with Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested at the city’s college, Cyril Fielding realizes that he has “stamped on [his] last collar stud” implying its ruin (67). Dr. Aziz, in an immediate moment of generosity offers his own, hiding the fact that it is the only one in his possession. Both characters internalize their reactions to the incident and its instant happy repair. The narrative’s perspective then pivots to Fielding’s interior thinking: “Fielding was not surprised at the rapidity of their intimacy. With so emotional a people it was apt to come at once or never, and he and Aziz, *having heard only good of each other*, could afford to dispense with the preliminaries” (68, my emphasis). This moment of intimacy is entirely predicated upon hearsay—what one character has heard about the other previous to this initial physical encounter. The intimacy is also predicated on the fact that both Aziz and Fielding ascribe to a cultural value system that credits the importance of informal reports and rumour. Each man immediately trusts the other, independent of “barbaric” constructions of South Asian men and the “vileness” of English-Indian fraternization articulated by the patriarchal narrative of the British imperial enterprise. The hearsay that has circulated around these men individually has shaped how one would perceive the other upon their first meeting. In her book *Gossip*, Patricia Spacks claims that “[g]ossip as a phenomenon raises questions about boundaries, authority, distance, [and] the nature of knowledge; it demands answers quite at odds with what we assume as our culture’s dominant values” (12).

The sparked friendship between the two men, ignited by their communally-constructed identities by the larger social environment, directly challenges the naturalized English cultural hierarchical system within occupied India. The characters’ identities were built upon, almost exclusively, by the Indian community and the
communal network of unregulated, ungovernable, and undetermined, but also powerful, mode of discourse.

The on-going friendship between Aziz and Fielding questions the inherent authority of the British, in addition to the inherent inferiority of the North Indian, triggering here what Bhabha would articulate as a moment of “colonial ambivalence.” Mr. Aziz is a “mimic man,” as indicated by his Western style of dress, education, and lexicon (“jolly good,” etc.). By associating with not only Aziz, but other South Asian characters in the novel as he does, Fielding’s own position respecting the British Empire is on equally unstable ground (much to the disapproval of the British colonial administration). Fielding still casts essentialist assumptions of Indians as a collective ethno-cultural group (“so emotional a people”), but in trusting the hearsay of others, he is also dismissing the English cultural values of empiricism and manifest evidence. He simply adheres to what has been said about Aziz by others within the specifically Indian community with whom Fielding associates. Indeed, the very fact that Fielding is more welcome amongst the ostensibly “inferior” social and racial group of the colonized subjects affirms his trust in their judgment of Aziz. Arguably, given his and Aziz’s immediate sense of fraternity, the foundational hearsay, and the characters’ compliance with it, there is a weakening of British-imposed social boundaries, and a debilitated authority of what David Spurr would call the imperializing rhetoric of “debasement.” Both men are ambiguous characters and articulate that ambiguity with not only their dress and manner, but also with what they regard as truth or deception. The discourse and exchanges that circulate around and between Fielding and Aziz, in opposition to the imperially sanctioned understanding of their relationship, informs their attitudes toward each other at their first meeting: attitudes that endure throughout the course of the novel.

The imperially sanctioned understanding of the relationship between Indian and British colonial subjects is, however, constituted in the character of Ronny Heaslop, the literary foil of Fielding and the representative figure of the young, ambitious, and misguided colonial administrator. Throughout the novel, Heaslop’s construction of colonized subjects is one-dimensional and essentializing—a creation in the larger mode of colonial myth-making in the empire’s global “civilizing mission.” As Spacks has previously noted, just as there is a form of gossip that questions authority and pressures its boundaries, other forms of rumour and falsely-constructed ontologies (in this large-scale form of imperial myth making) may also form a discourse that reflects the values of the hegemonic community “interpreting [it] to itself” (231). In this interpretation of the self, there is almost always constructed a diametrically opposed subject that is discursively designed to only reinforce the “self” in a world of oppositional “others.”

Despite Spack’s argument about the innocuous nature of myth making, when contextualized within an environment of racialized prejudice, imperial myth making can easily escalate into unforgiving and dangerous stereotyping. As an example, in the same sequence in which Fielding and Aziz cement their friendship (marking a moment of
anti-colonial resistance), Heaslop affirms his own stereotypical views of Indian subjects. Having finished the tour of the Fielding’s college, the touring party (including Aziz), is in the middle of bidding their goodbyes when Heaslop underhandedly says, “Aziz was eloquently dressed, from tie-pin to spats, but he had forgotten his back collar-stud, and there you have the Indian all over: inattention to detail; the fundamental slackness that reveals the race” (87). With this utterance, Ronny Heaslop is sustaining the imperialist perspective of colonial England, as he simultaneously reveals his own colonial anxiety. With the phrase, “the Indian all over,” Ronny is essentializing an entire population of people, indiscriminately denigrating their subjectivity by emphasizing their seemingly inherent incapability. This model of stereotyping was ubiquitous within English-occupied India, as Bhabha and Spurr argue, to maintain difference between the two groups and to further justify the British occupation. In Bhabha’s essay, “The Other Question…,” there is an in-depth discussion of “colonial discourse” which configures the colonized subject as fixed and degenerate only as a means to justify colonial hegemony. Bhabha argues that “processes of subjectification [are] made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse” (95), and that the colonizer relies on the stereotype of his colonized subjects as “a secure point of identification” (99), revealing the ambivalence and colonial anxiety that underpins this discursive strategy. Colonial discourse and its strategic function as “the creation of a space for a ‘subject peoples’… in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administrates and instruction” (101), is a way to unpack the hegemonic narratives of Eurocentric teleology that are found in Ronny Heaslop’s imperial utterances. David Spurr, in a chapter entitled “Debasement: Filth and Defilement,” agrees with Bhabha when he notes that qualities are assigned to the colonized peoples—“dishonesty, suspicion, superstition, lack of self-discipline” reflecting “a projection of anxiety onto the racial and cultural Other” (76-77). There is more revealed about Heaslop in this comment than any actual truth about Indians as a race of people. Furthermore, it is earlier revealed that Aziz was only missing his collar-stud because he had given it to Fielding, emphasizing how Heaslop’s comments mark the ignorance on the part of the colonial authority, and the racist perceptions that underpin his colonial worldview.

Though the previous two examples stress the importance of how information between characters is shared and the potential help it may be in determining relationships between interlocutors within the novel, there are other examples in A Passage to India in which the sway of rumour may mean life or death. The climax of this novel deals with an alleged attack made upon Amelia Quested and the rumours that fly around not only the event, but also the signification of this event, particularly as the memory of the 1857 Mutiny rests on the minds of both Indians and Britons. Dr. Aziz is accused of the attack made upon Quested in the Marabar Caves, and should he be convicted of that crime, his punishment would be no less than a life sentence, or perhaps even death. In a particularly fraught scene during Aziz’s trial in the courthouse, a
group of English colonial subjects accompany Quested onto the witness platform, collectively symbolizing not only their unity, but also assumption of colonial superiority. The lawyer defending Aziz asks that the group step off of the platform, as they have no legal right to be up there with the witness. The presiding judge hesitantly agrees (perhaps knowing his job may be at stake) and the imperial group sits down with the others in the court hall. Forster, in painting this scene, constructs the sequence in a series of wild whispers: “[t]he news of their humiliation spread quickly, and people jeered outside. Their special chairs followed them ... People began to talk all over the room, about chairs, ordinary and special, strips of carpet, platforms one foot high” (245-46). The embarrassed silence of the haughty British is enveloped in the energetic whispers and rumours of the Indian courtroom hall. Above all other passages within A Passage to India, this sequence symbolically refers to the narratives of the colonial enterprise being supplanted by the alternative narrative or discourse of the colonized subjects. The English remain mute throughout the remainder of the trial, their signifying silence marking a discursive defeat.

The energetic buzz of the courtroom following the humiliated and demeaned “authority,” would be described by Homi Bhabha as a moment of colonial “panic” in his essay, “By Bread Alone: Signs of Violence in the Mid-nineteenth Century.” Using the 1857 Mutiny as a point of entry, Bhabha considers the role of rumour and its agency during heightened times of political tumult. He argues that “[t]he indeterminate circulation of meaning as rumour or conspiracy, with its perverse, psychic affects of panic, constitutes the intersubjective realm of revolt and resistance” (287). In other words, the inability to determine a central epistemological location for an identity, idea, or ideology, creates a break in the Westernized formation of structure; a structure whose maintenance is urgently needed within the colonial peripheries of British India. Particularly in times of contention between colonizing and colonized subjects, rumour acts as an alternative discourse that destabilizes the definitive authority of the former over the latter. With the evolution of fear and “panic,” rumour implies a slip in colonial power, and with that slip, a widening gap for alternative discourses to usurp the colonial one. Rumour has not only the ability to unify a subjugated people (as is indicated by the ubiquity of the gossip in the courtroom scene), but also allows for that unified body to be a voice of rebel agency. Bhabha continues, however, to mention the trickiness that can accompany gossip and rumour. For Bhabha, “the transmission of anxiety...in a form of circulation in-between the colonized and the colonizer” ends up being a moment of ambivalence and liminality (294). He argues definitively that rumour leads to conspiracy, and with that comes action, usually against the hegemonic powers that have imposed legislative and imperial modes of silencing those oppressively subjugated. The Bhabhian “moment of panic” imbues this courtroom scene; the whispers of injustice inside the courtroom heightened into a louder vocal wave of jeers outside of it. The overwhelming presence of gossip and rumour reflects not only the impotency of the English
court system in India as a system of civil order, but also indicates that rumour (its origins being from the subaltern’s inability to speak) as a form of colonial resistance can produce the silence of a racialized imperial apparatus.

The historical event of the “riot” at Chauri Chaura, chronicled by Amin’s *Event, Metaphor, Memory*, speaks to the relevance of rumour not only in literature, but in the larger social and cultural implications rumour and gossip have in the reality of colonialism in occupied India. In his examination of the event, Amin critically assesses how rumour, as methodology, can interrogate the colonial narrative strategies that build an imperialist epistemology. In recovering events like those of Chauri Chaura, marginalized voices once muted by the British colonists are also recovered. Amin historically anchors what Forster articulates in the literary world—access to rumour is at least partial access to a subaltern history and worldview. The ‘riot’ of 1922 took place approximately ten years after the publication *A Passage to India*, but the racialized prejudices against the Indian communities is resonant at both sites (on the page and in reality). Tension between those who are occupied and those who are occupying builds in the early 1900s, and rises to a crescendo just prior to official decolonization and partition.

At the turn of the twentieth century, British authors expressed doubt about the legitimacy of their country’s occupation of India and reflected this heightened sense of colonial uncertainty in their literature. This is true of not only Forster’s *A Passage to India* but also Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* and George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*. Yet, within these three novels, the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses that channel into the landscape of British-Indian tensions are patriarchal and masculine in their nature. In *A Passage to India*, in addition to the other works previously mentioned, women of colour are nearly invisible, shadowed by the “purdah,” or consistently on the periphery of the novel’s main narrative thread. There is an air of indifference toward the lives of these women, or the potential agency they try to enact. As an example, on the day of Aziz’s trial, “a number of Mohammedan ladies had sworn to take no food until the prisoner was acquitted; their death would make little difference, indeed, being invisible, they seemed dead already, nevertheless it was disquieting” (237). The male Anglo-Indian characters are not concerned with the condition of women of colour, inclusivity of gendered discourses, and the subaltern condition. Nor do these concerns surface as thematically important for the canon of Anglo-Indian novels produced during the colonial era. As with Forster’s *Passage*, there seems to be a common thread in works written during this time of imperial occupation: issues of race, which appear to be naturalized as male, consistently trump issues of gender.

Not until well into the twentieth century is a reader able to consider issues of both raced and gendered forms of discourse within a colonial context, at which time postcolonial authors revisit their historical and literary genealogies in novels. Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* can be argued as an intertextual engagement with works like *A Passage to India*, intentionally reflecting upon the memories of a historical past to incorporate voices
that were patriarchally considered mute and easily dismissed. Sidhwa’s novel deals directly with the violence of the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan as it foregrounds a narrative of a young girl living and growing up in Lahore, temporally set only thirty years after the young Aziz was put on trial. Though Cracking India was published in 1991, nearly fifty years after the partition, it is the first novel written by a woman to address not only the violence committed against women during the 1947 independence and partition of the Indian sub-continent, but also constructs a narrative found in the voices of frequently marginalized and in the female subjects who were impacted by the violent split between India and Pakistan. Sidhwa’s novel is a counter-narrative of sorts; telling the history of the partition from below, the novel focuses on the disabled Lenny, her Ayah, and later Hamida, in lieu of the patriarchal and hegemonic colonial narratives and counter-colonial narratives iterated by the male authors who write of the 1947 partition. Chronologically, the novel, as a historical fiction, recounts the gripped tensions of the time just prior to the partition (including Britain’s presence), and the violent aftermath of the partition during which millions of Muslims and Hindus are displaced or heinousely murdered. While women are subjects of violence within the novel, there are moments of female subaltern resistance that de-center familiar masculine notions of political power. Rumour and gossip in Cracking India function as a definitively feminist counter-narrative to the patriarchal hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses that have previously constituted the colonial and post-colonial South Asian canon. Considered intertextually with A Passage to India, which deals with racial divides and rumour, it is crucial to examine the gendered ways in which gossip can supply a window to alternative and subversive counter-narratives for subaltern subjects.

Lenny, the youthful protagonist, is raised in a Parsi family. In yet-partitioned Northeast India her family is considered politically and socially “neutral,” given the fact that Parsis compose only a small percentage of the entire population and are therefore not a politically threatening demographic group (Singh 29). This neutral position for Lenny and her family allows for her parents to host dinners, inviting those of disparate political backgrounds, religions, and ideologies. Early in the novel, one such dinner portrays the Parsi home as the neutral “contact zone” being compromised by the political polarity of its guests, making the site more a political battlefield than a place of welcome neutrality and civil conversation. Mr. Rogers, an English inspector, and Mr. Singh, a Punjabi Sikh engage in a heated argument during what seems to be the last dinner held before Indian national independence and partition.

‘You won’t be able to blame everything on us for long, old chap,’ says Inspector General Rogers. ‘That old bugger, Gandhi, is up to his old bag of tricks...That wily Banya [referring to Gandhi] is an expert on fasting unto death without dying’ ‘And what if he dies?’ questions Mr. Singh righteously. ‘You mark my word. One day he will die! Then what you will do?’ ‘I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll celebrate!’ says the Inspector General, losing his patience. (70-71)
The escalating verbal altercation results in a violent close call; Mr. Singh, after being continuously insulted by Rogers, picks up a fork and attempts to attack the Inspector General, aiming for his eyes. Lenny’s father and the wives of the two men are able to stop Singh from doing any harm to Rogers, but the dinner conversation about politics comes to an abrupt end after this incident. Lenny, eager to be a part of the political conversation, hides under the dinner table, eavesdropping on the entire unfolding of the conversation that leads to the attack. The knowledge she gains from the conversation is both literally and figuratively acquired from below. This sequence speaks to two important literary representations of the historical events preceding the partition. Firstly, the cultural assumptions about the Parsi family leads to larger discussions about the multitudinous racial groups that were affected by the partition, thereby pressuring not only the racialized assumptions Rogers makes about Indians (echoing Ronny Heaslop’s stereotyping), but also speaks to the second historical issue of Gandhi’s religious and ideological role within the Independence movement. It is in this argument, riddled with direct insults and ad homonym attacks, that the history of the tense dialogue of pre-independent India is relayed.

The Sethi dinner table, as a site for this altercation, provides a “third space,” negotiating between public movements and private opinions allowing for oppositional discourses and marginalized ideologies to be discussed. Specifically, the conversation reflects the failure of the male-driven hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses of empire and nation in this novel. Both forms of discourse stereotype, racially condemn, and inevitably result in violence, but also unconsciously exclude the voices of marginalized subjects, represented here by the silenced wives and Parsi father. Given the exclusion of marginalized subjects in both imperial and national narratives, it is important to dwell on the critique that Sidhwa is articulating in this sequence. What Sidhwa gestures toward is the actual impotency of these patriarchal narrative structures in the story of South Asian nation-building. Both men are unable to come to terms with the other’s personal and political views of how India could or should be formed. As Rogers symbolizes the Eurocentric telos of modernity, Singh echoes the sentiments of the majority groups oppressed by the colonial regime. However, despite this diametrically opposed disagreement, Sidhwa’s use of the politically silent third party (found in the Sethi family, and the wives) critically points to the multiple demographies that would be equally impacted by the partition, but are inextricably silenced in the ideological formation of the nation(s). The very fact that violence concludes the charged discussion, with an attack on one of the interlocutor’s eyes, symbolically suggests that in this instance, these political conversations are blind to not only the other groups affected by the partition decision, but also the fact that these groups, including women and non-majority religious groups, will need to break through their complicit silence or remain victims of it. The conversation between Rogers and Singh, so early in the novel, registers the inability for the narrative of nation to be constructed from the top down. As a brief counterpoint, however, these silent figures, also embodied in the silent Lenny underneath
the table, may also be acting out a refusal to engage with the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives of the two representative men. The refusal to engage in the conversation could be argued as a moment of nuanced resistance, acknowledging the fact that neither of the narratives spoken by Rogers and Singh is the appropriate story to tell. Whether the silence of the majority of the subjects at (or under) the dinner table speaks to the refusal to engage in this discourse or to their symbolic exclusion from collaborating with these men in the narrative of the nation, there is a direct indication that subaltern subjects must find alternative avenues or modes of discourse should they wish to have any form of representation within the larger national community.

Lenny, triply marked by her gender, disability, and ethno-cultural and religious background, is also distinguished by her ability to absorb multiple kinds of knowledge as she navigates through the partition and the events portrayed in the novel. Not only is she privy to the discourse espoused by “authoritarian” figures like Singh and Rogers, but more importantly, she is witness to conversations and gossip vocalized by those who experience political tension on a concrete and daily basis: the gossip and hearsay “on the ground,” so to speak. In describing her experience with Ayah in Queen Victoria’s Park, she “learns fast… of human needs, frailties, cruelties, and joys” (29). Silently absorbing the information around her, Lenny listens in to a conversation between Ayah and her newest love interest, the Pathan Sharbat Khan:

Sharbat Khan cautions Ayah: ‘These are bad times—Allah knows what’s in store…’

The Congresswallahs are after Jinnah’s blood
‘What’s it to us if Jinnah, Nehru and Patel fight? They are not fighting our fight,’ says Ayah lightly.
‘That may be true,’ says Sharbat Khan thoughtfully, ‘but they are stirring up trouble for us all.’ (84)

This sequence illustrates a utilization of information, transmuting political conversations into gossip and reconstructing major political figures like Gandhi and Nehru to familiar terms. With this transmutation comes the simultaneous reduction of these authoritative figures (both as characters and as real men) to a level of casual acquaintance. Gossip, as understood and mediated by Lenny and relayed to the reader, is a narrative discourse that is slippery, easily mutable and ever shifting; the power of silence is reined in by Lenny equally as the quiet observer either under a dinner table, or at the side of her Ayah in a park. The heavily hegemonized narratives of both the colonial and counter-colonial speakers at the dinner table carry the same significance as a conversation between an ostracized Pathan and a poor Ayah. In fact, the repetition of Lenny’s “learning” from her outings in the park (in addition to her rapt silence during these moments of political gossip, as found between Ayah and Sharbat) speaks to her dependence upon the knowledge gained while with her Ayah. Singular “authoritative” discourse is therefore destabilized in these moments, and redistributed to entirely new venues and recontextualized to include multiple spaces in which “authority” for Lenny can be located. Spacks elucidates the power of ver-
bal relay and the potential consequences that it may incur. She argues that “one can never know quite where it goes, whom it reaches, how it changes in transmission, and how and by whom it is understood … it often violates the ‘claims of civility,’ but it incorporates the possibility that people utterly lacking in public power may affect the views of figures who make things happen in the public sphere” (6-7). The transmission of discourse from the mouths of those with ostensible patriarchal and public authority (Singh and Rogers) to a social space constructed as public but unauthoritative (a park) corroborates Spacks’ argument, while augmenting it to consider the gendered nature of public and private spheres and who maintains authority within these respective spaces.

Unlike *A Passage to India*, where narrative agency remains between male Muslim and British speakers with Indian women located “behind the purdah,” in *Cracking India* the reader recognizes a shift in the characters of Lenny and Ayah in pre-partition Lahore. Sidhwa’s novel follows what Harveen Sachdeva Mann calls a “female script,” listing the characters that the novel centers on and the roles that they play, within a larger critique about the violence and denigration towards women that occurred during the 1947 partition. Specifically, Mann acknowledges Sidhwa’s clever use of de-centering the importance of Nehru and Gandhi (in particular), as a means to strip the men of arbitrarily allocated entitlement, particularly as Gandhi’s representation is ambiguously flawed respecting his views toward women (95-96). Within the historical narrative of South Asian nation-building, both men have been figured as iconic representatives of a nationalist movement. Yet, the grand narrative of the nation as determined by the broad strokes of nationalist discourse is directly countered with the ground-level discussions by the marginalized, subaltern, and disabled of Sidhwa’s work. Mann asserts that Sidhwa produces “an alternative version of Indian history as it is remembered and rehearsed by ordinary citizens, not politicians or historians, on the other side of the subcontinental divide” (73). This alternative history is not only mediated by men from varying social and racial delineations as was found in *Passage to India*, but by both men and women, arguably with women having more power over this alternative history as *Cracking India* progresses.

The construction of an alternative history of the partition, mediated by gossip as it is in this novel, gives insight into how a woman’s agency can be established in politically marginalized conditions and spaces. More importantly, the access to knowledge attained through gossip may also mean the difference between freedom and life, or servitude and death. Throughout *Cracking India* there are several accounts of sexual violence committed against women: unforgivable crimes echoing the fact that the casualties of civil war are very often those who do not engage with the political ideologies that catalyze the war from its start. Violence and political ideologies are not considered at the national level in this novel, but are rather understood by the emotions, reactions, and sensibilities of specific characters to the events that occur to either themselves or their families. Lenny feels the seemingly arbitrary selection of these casualties sacrificed to ideologies of
nationalism (who are often women) when Ayah is abducted from the Sethi home. Lenny obsesses over the loss, consistently pleading with her mother and godmother to search for her companion. Ayah’s location and the conditions surrounding her abduction and ensuing captivity are only known to Lenny through her godmother and the network of people that she uses to gain otherwise unattainable information. Sidhwa makes a point to describe the power Godmother has when locked into these unofficial channels: “[n]o baby—not even a kitten—is delivered within the sphere of her influence without her becoming instantly aware of its existence. And this is the source of her immense power, this reservoir of random knowledge...You cannot be near her without feeling her uncanny strength” (222-23). The alternative to patriarchal and exclusive hegemonic political discourse is embodied in Godmother; gossip and rumour are what give her uncanny power, knowledge, and agency.

Through the medium of hearsay, Ayah is rescued from her sexual prison and returned to Lenny. During the encounter between Godmother and Ayah’s captor at his house in the red district of Hira Mandi (literally Diamond Market), Godmother uses her unique strength to exercise her contempt for the man’s irredeemable actions. In an expanded sequence, Godmother denounces him as a “low-born, two-bit evil little mouse,” “the son of pigs and pimps,” and “whining haramzada,” amongst other deserved insults. In a final moment of reflection, Lenny realizes, “[t]he confrontation between Ice-candy-man [Ayah’s abductor and captor] and Godmother opened up my eyes to the wisdom of righteous indignation over compassion” (260-61, 264).

The injustices committed against the subaltern subject of Ayah, are vocalized through the other arguably subaltern subject of the godmother, with gossip providing the framework in which knowledge is gained and wielded as a weapon of resistance against a male-dominated framework of gendered politics. Rumour suggesting the location where Ayah was hidden, and the gossip about her sexualized imprisonment by the Ice-candy-man are what leads Godmother directly to her and facilitates the rescue. Female empowerment is found in the fact that all of the agents that participated in Ayah’s rescue are women. Though men are the perpetrators of her capture and denigration as a sex slave in the Hira Mandi, the women of this novel, through their interconnected network of “sources,” directly counter patriarchal and masculinized discursive power structures (Sidhwa 252-55).

Considered intertextually, A Passage to India and Cracking India point to alternative methods of knowledge production, meaning construction, and alternative forms of discourse that build the concept of a nation. In Forster, writing in colonial Anglo-India, numerous anxieties about racial discrimination and marginalization of racialized figures are brought to the foreground as two men from different ethno-cultural communities attempt a friendship in a politically contrarian environment. Sidhwa’s novel engages with the voices of those absent from Forster’s work, in-sinuating the agency of subaltern female subjects into the building of a national consciousness. Both authors write either of or from a moment of national anxiety in northern India or Pakistan, and in their respective historical moments, use gossip as a means to dismantle
the colonial or hegemonic narratives of how a nation is to be represented.

The role that each author plays in creating a dialogic novel is important to consider. Both novels incorporate dialogue between characters, but also construct a negotiation between Western values of patriarchy and colonialism, and portray subaltern characters that directly question the legitimacy of Westernized notions of authoritative discourse. According to Spacks, gossip in literature questions even the authority of the written word—“the double context of literary language, no longer entirely the narrator’s property, never entirely the reader’s, generates much of that language’s power” (21). Dialogue between the author or narrator and the reader is consistently contextualized by a personal history informed by race, gender, ethnicity, and myriad other characteristics. Much like gossip, information given, received, and understood establishes a relationship between author and reader, bound by either mutual intelligibility or a rhetorical exchange of ideas. Exchanges are not solely occurring between interlocutors within the two novels discussed, but also between the authors composing the dialogues and the reader who is “listening” to them. Given that the political nature of both of these texts is informed by their geographical and historical importance, it is crucial to consider the exchanges that occur between characters as well as between the narrator and a reader. Such consideration may help enrich a further understanding about the political implications of discourse, narrative, and the power of orality within colonial and postcolonial literature.

1 “Pluriversal” is a term derived from Walter Mignolo’s work on decoloniality. Derived from Carl Schmitt’s model of the pluriversal, Mignolo argues that the political formation of multiple states and multiple forms of governance on a global scale is the most egalitarian mode of decolonial living. The role of the West “should be global but not universal” (72). I use the term pluriversal here to mark the idea that multiple discursive frameworks can occupy a historical narrative, or a narrative within a piece of literature, and that all frames for understanding oneself through discourse, narrative, and communication, could be considered on equal planes, and considered equally valuable in the mythos of nation-building.

2 Mimicry, continued from this discussion above is a “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite” (126, his emphasis). Yet, imbricated on top of that definition is Bhabha’s argument of the “double articulation” of the mimic. This double articulation is described as the colonized subject appropriating a more “Western” identity in order to be more recognizable within colonial discourse, and by extension the colonial mindset. However, the “other” serves as a threat to the colonizer, as it introduces a deviance from the attempt to normalize colonial discourse as a sweeping, “universalization” of Western ideology over Eastern cultural systems. It is this idea that “almost the same, but not quite/white” creates a sense of ambivalence over the role of the mimic man.

3 David Spurr writes that in the historical moments that the West needed to justify its colonization of the “East,” including South Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there would be a rhetorical gesture toward the “obsessive debasement of the Other.” He argues that this “discourse arises not simply from fear and the recognition of difference, but also, on another level, from a desire for and identification with the Other which must be resisted” (80). It is within this moment between Fielding
and Aziz that identification with the Other is not being resisted.

4 I am referring to Pratt’s essay, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” in which she defines a contact zone as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” and in the essay, she further exemplifies the social and transcultural implications of the contact zone—particularly assessing the colonial subject’s attempt to keep the imbalance of power (34).
Works Cited


