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I Bet You’re Wonderin’ How I Knew: The Politics of Gossip in E.M. Forster and Bapsi Sidhwa

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Gossip

Patricia Meyer Spacks’ study on gossip in literature emphasizes the “hidden life of language,” the role of gossip as “a phenomenon that raises questions about boundaries, authority, distance, the nature of knowledge; it demands answers quite at odds with what we assume as our culture’s dominant values” (12). In “inhabit[ing] a space of intimacies,” writes Spacks, gossip “builds on and implicitly articulates shared values of intimates” (15). What makes Spacks’ subsequent argument so compelling is the way in which she reads the range of gossip’s affective register—from “malice” to “intimacy”—as a measure of social positions that jostle against each other in literary works from those of Spenser to Agatha Christie. Victoria Barnett-Woods, whose paper I respond to here, seeks to extend this formulation of gossip to E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*. In so doing, Barnett-Woods broaches questions of how gossip figures into “colonial” and “post-colonial” novels about India, and, from this, how gossip in “highly politicized” texts might “offer an alternative understanding of how [these two] novels could be understood” (Barnett-Woods 63). Barnett-Woods’ provocative and insightful position invites us to reimagine gossip as a means of counter-discourse in Forster and Sidhwa. Before we may do so, however, I argue that we need to first attend carefully to how jingoism and racial violence characterized the Raj’s paternalist agenda at the turn of the century. This history is entangled in power politics that, prior to explicit British intervention in the early 17th century, involved myriad kingdoms, tribes, ethnic groups, castes, rural populations, and religious groups. These struggles continued amidst the British Empire’s commercial and political ventures. British commerce as such dovetailed into political consolidation through military force, first in the form of the East India Company (following the 1757 Battle of Plassey) and, following the 1857 Rebellion, the British Crown (1858-1947). By investigating how both Forster and Sidhwa attend to these genealogies, I seek here to build on and complicate the theoretical groundwork that Barnett-Woods’ formulation of gossip lays out for us.

Barnett-Woods begins with the apt observation that gossip in *A Passage to India* “marks moments of both intimacy and revulsion between characters, and indirectly marks the socio-cultural and political issues that
Forster” raises (63). Indeed, countless instances of gossip populate the text: Aziz, Ali, and Hamidullah constantly chatter about the English, just as the British officers while away their hours at the whites-only club in idle talk about each other and the Indians. Barnett-Woods is also correct to draw attention to the fact that gossip is but one element in a novel that trades in many different modes of discourse. The text overflows with snatch-es of casual conversation, misunderstandings, shared intimacies, insights both trivial and profound, jokes, rumours, administrative and legal jargon, the indistinct clamour of crowds, songs, snatches of poetry—the list goes on. This hodgepodge of speech contributes to the novel’s prolonged meditation on politics, race, friendship, sex, and religion in the colonial context of 1910s Chandrapore, all filtered through E.M. Forster’s modernist and Western-humanistic aesthetic.

I would argue, however, that gossip is not exactly a counter-discourse here, but one discursive register amongst many others. The warp and woof of these registers collide at the level of Chandrapore’s racially-charged atmosphere more generally. When Barnett-Woods draws on the oft-cited scene of Aziz and Fielding’s first encounter, she zeroes in on the narrator’s remark that the two had “heard only good of each other, [and] could afford to dispense with the preliminaries” (Forster qtd. in Barnett-Woods 63). What remains yet to be considered here is how the circulation of these precursory, well-disposing third-hand accounts “directly challenges the English cultural and social hierarchical systems within occupied India” (Barnett-Woods 63). Given the heightened climate of racism and mutual suspicion between Anglos and Indians after 1857, Fielding does breach some unspoken rules of racial etiquette when he befriends Aziz, but what does this say about the immediate racial tensions embedded in the scene? I would suggest that the way Aziz must cross the room’s partitions and spatial boundaries allegorizes the racial and social boundaries that will always separate him from Fielding—and so Forster’s point here is less about “‘subversion’ than about how Indians (a specific set of economically privileged, Muslim, male Indians at that) and colonizers negotiate social intimacy in Chandrapore’s politically and racially charged atmosphere. Fielding might come across as affable, but Aziz never lets us forget the shape and direction of the power discrepancy that mediates this relationship.

Indeed, this very asymmetry informs the bulk of the Forster criticism that takes Aziz and Fielding as metonyms for the Indian professional establishment’s tense relationship with the British in 1910, a moment in which the push for national independence was still somewhat embryonic and splintered between competing interest groups.¹ We still talk about Forster nearly a century after A Passage to India’s publication precisely because the text refuses to resolve these tensions. The novel’s closing scene deliberately plays on nationalist antagonisms when Aziz declares to Fielding,

“We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don’t make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it’s fifty five-hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then”—he rose against him furiously—“and then,” he concluded,
Aziz’s “half-kiss” suggests that he will not—indeed cannot—give his whole self to Fielding, not while India itself remains split between the Anglos and the natives. Forster forecloses any possibility of resolution, playing instead in the fissures of circumstance that complicate desire in the abstract, invested as it may be in politics, power, friendship, sex, or death. The novel thrives on the messy ambiguity of human relationships, the fact that people can love and hate one another with the same degree of intensity at the same time, a quandary made messier still when politics, race, and gender contribute to the equation. With that said, I assent to Barnett-Woods’ suggestion that gossip functions as a means of establishing and maintaining a given set of social boundaries, both between the novel’s Anglo-Indians and the natives, as well as within the little cliques that constitute both groups in the world that Forster creates. But the problem of social intimacy and gossip, while not exactly different in kind from politics, is nevertheless several steps away from the latter. A rigorous theory of gossip in the text, then, must explicitly bridge the intimacy and social codes constitutive of Aziz and Fielding’s friendship with the macrostructural problem of politics that haunts these intimacies.

The interplay between intimacy and politics can also complicate the centrality of rumour in the courtroom episode. Here, Barnett-Woods imagines an ideological rupture formative to the “humiliated and demeaned ‘authority’” (66) of Miss Quested’s friends when Das, the Hindu judge overseeing the trial, orders them to return to the gallery. But I think that Das’ request does not necessarily signal the “discursive defeat” of the “haughty” British—as Barnett-Woods puts it—so much as it invokes a rather absurd moment of misguided solidarity amongst a group of pampered, upper-class Anglo-Indians accustomed to getting their way (66). If anything, we could say that it is Miss Quested’s friends who, in attempting to abuse their racial and social power, are disciplined by the juridical authority vested in the body of a Hindu who acts here as judge. Authority as such remains the purview of the imperial sovereign, but it imposes itself here upon the whites. Ironically, that sovereign authority expresses itself through the brown body of Das-as-judge. This opens up the fraught—and, historically, very real—problem of the Crown’s profound discomfort with granting judicial powers to Indian subjects in court cases involving white parties on either side.

**Gender**

Barnett-Woods’ attention to the power discrepancies formative to rumour and imperial racism invites us to think carefully about how power circulates in the context of Miss Quested’s accusation and subsequent retraction. This problem raises a number of further important questions, particularly about women in turn-of-the-century India. In addition to its racial discrepancy, does the Anglo-Indian judicial system allow a space for white women to assert themselves as victims, or does Ronny Heaslop’s status as the “recipient of all the evil intended” against the whites, as the figure who is left “bearing the sahib’s...
cross” (Forster 182), efface the very real problem of violence against (at this point, exclusively white) women in general? Does Miss Quested’s initial accusation, as Brenda Silver argues, slot Aziz into the subject position of ““woman” according to a patriarchal biopolitics of ‘periphrasis’” (Silver 91) that reduces all social subjects to sexually-constituted determinants under the imperative of imperial patriarchy? Most important, perhaps, is the question of how we are to acknowledge Muslim women as agents in a discursive grid that continually strives to either speak for or over them.

Forster makes a brief—but profoundly unsettling—gesture toward this final problem with the narrative’s acknowledgement of the “Mohammedan ladies [who] had sworn to take no food until [Aziz] was acquitted” in spite of the fact that “their death would make little difference, [as] indeed, being invisible, they seemed dead already, nevertheless it was disquieting” (209). This brief aside interrupts a narrative otherwise preoccupied almost exclusively with the tensions between white men, brown men, and white women. Does the narrator’s lament about the general indifference to whether brown women live or die pre-emptively foreclose their status as human beings? If so, is their hunger strike to be interpreted within a social imaginary predicated on their allegiance to Aziz as a sort of figurehead for a heterosexist community of Muslim mimic men? Or, on the other hand, does their “disquieting” (209) invisibility gesture toward their necessarily unstable and problematic social positioning within that imaginary from the start?

The “disquieting” presence of the “Mohammedan ladies” (209) indirectly anticipates Chandra Mohanty’s critique of Western feminism in her seminal essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse.” Mohanty argues that Western feminist critiques of the global south have historically championed the white, liberated, Western woman as the radical ideal toward which all women should aspire. The major problem with this approach, continues Mohanty, is that an analysis that fails to take into account the heterogeneity of oppression in different contexts across the world—and at different moments in history—reinscribes the formal conditions of the very patriarchal structure that feminism purports to contest. As a consequence, a critical approach that effaces the heterogeneity of third-world women imposes in those women’s manifold subject positions a universalizing totality, a “composite, singular ‘third-world’ woman” (Mohanty 197).

Mohanty reminds us here that feminist theory, without a strong account of the material, social, and historical contingencies that define a given colonial context, risks lapsing into a naïve abstraction of power inequity based on the simple binary of man and woman in which ‘man’ = ‘oppressor’ and ‘woman’ = ‘oppressed.’ (Never mind, for the moment, that the lack of racial qualifiers leaves us to assume the man and the woman are white). This gets still more fraught in the context of colonial power because internal conflicts specific to a given colony at a given historical moment beget further splinterings, gendered and otherwise, amongst subjects or groups of subjects.
While Forster’s too-brief acknowledgement of women in the turn of the century India indirectly anticipated these later theoretical insights, the role of politically active women such as the Rani of Jhansi (1835-58) or Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri (the political activist to whose 1926 suicide Gayatri Spivak attends in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”) exceed the scope of the novel’s imaginary. It makes sense, then, that Barnett-Woods would turn to Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* as a text that immediately engages with the political contradictions inherent to questions of women’s agency and sexual violence during the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan. Barnett-Woods’ analysis of Sidhwa proceeds from the premise that gossip embodies the “utilization of [unofficial] information, transmuting political conversations into gossip and reconstructing major political figures like Gandhi and Nehru to familiar terms” (70). This “reconstruction,” in turn, carries political and sexual valences which find their expression as such through gossip. Additionally, Ayah, Lenny, and Godmother, according to Barnett-Woods, follow a “female script” that offers a “larger critique about the violence and denigration towards women that occurred during the 1947 partition” (71). Ayah’s sexual promiscuity and power over her would-be suitors over the first two-thirds of the novel, for example, chafes against the socially conservative rhetoric of the Indian Congress’s sexually vexed brand of nationalism—a point that Barnett-Woods importantly takes into consideration. To Barnett-Woods’ remarks I would add that the eventual dissolution of Ayah’s centripetal force for the group of men who surround her speaks more generally to Lenny’s observation that, with the impending division of the nation, “[p]eople shrink, dwindling into symbols. Ayah is no longer my all-encompassing Ayah—she is also a token. A Hindu” (101). What, then, are we to make of the Partition as a real historical moment in which power and identity divide friends and neighbours according to a biopolitically determined set of juridico-legal criteria? Moreover, how might we interpret this problem against Ayah’s shift from a self-assured and sensually secure human being to an object of sexual violence in the events leading up to her marriage to Ice-candy-man?

Barnett-Woods astutely interprets the novel as a counterweight to “the historical narrative of South-Asian nation-building” forwarded by major figures like Gandhi, Nehru, and Jinnah (Barnett-Woods 71)—but to build on this, I would suggest that Sidhwa provokes us to think through how women in the novel confront sexual violence as something that emerges from the enforced subdivision and reconstruction of subjects in relation to the conservative-nationalist discourse that characterized the Indian Congress Party. This is an explicitly political issue. Although Barnett-Woods does well to address gossip’s potential as a discursive circuit that speaks to gender, she does come dangerously close to depoliticizing the problem of sex and gender when she contends that “[v]iolence 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

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themselves or their families” (71). This claim implicitly separates Lahore’s domestic and public spheres into mutually exclusive zones predicated on a fixed sexual division of labour. The symbolic order of politics and the law remains the purview of men such as Gandhi, Jinnah, and Nehru, while women are scripted as “emotional” subjects located in the domestic structure of the family, thereby enforcing the very patriarchal structure that Barnett-Woods otherwise credits the novel with contesting.

Although the text confronts the inherently violent sexual politics that condition India and Pakistan’s gendered divisions of labour, I would argue that it does not make any claims toward resolving them. Late in the novel, for instance, Lenny’s mother returns from one of her many rescue missions for Lahore’s abducted women, only to walk in on Imam Din as he pins a stray cat to the screen door:

Imam Din, one leg on the ground and one on the kitchen steps, has a huge black and battle-scarred cat trapped in the screen door and is pressing his whole weight on the frame to hold the slippery intruder. The cat, caught below its ribs, is suspended a foot off the floor. Frantically twisting, its teeth bared, the panicked creature is spitting wildly. (237)

While the neighbours and servants encourage Imam Din to beat and torture the cat, Lenny’s mother screams at Imam Din to “Let her go at once!” (237). Lenny remarks that her mother “cannot see the cat’s gender—it is secreted behind the door—but the rest of us seem to know it’s a him” (237, emphasis in original). The scene escalates as Lenny’s mother hits Imam Din so hard that she draws blood. When Lenny’s father enters the kitchen, Lenny’s mother lets up, but she nevertheless admonishes Imam Din for “snivelling” before “Sahib,” and adds that “[i]f he whines like a woman he must wear bangles” (239).

Lenny’s mother is embroiled here in a contradiction that she cannot entirely resolve. While her gendering of the cat as a “her” and her subsequent attack on Imam Din signal a brief, if explosive, moment of clarity about how deeply embedded gender violence really is in India/Pakistan’s national consciousness, the father’s arrival immediately reinstates the hetero-patriarchal order from which that very code of violence originates. (For his own part, Imam Din’s Muslimhood and professional role as a servant to a Parsi family complicates this still more, as does the symbolic charge of a flyswatter as Lenny’s mother’s weapon of choice. The economy of labour and subsequent social hierarchy amongst the servants and their Parsi employers is a topic for another paper, however.) Imam Din’s feminization by Lenny’s mother compounds his racial and professional subalternity according to the logic of a biopolitical economy under which Lenny’s father occupies the role of patriarchal figurehead. Somewhat paradoxically, Imam Din’s sexual subordination as such comes about from a moment in which this very economy is momentarily shattered by Lenny’s mother’s anguish, only to be re-established through her sexist insult—Imam Din should wear “bangles” if he is going to keep “snivelling” (239)—that coincides with the father’s arrival. In other words, Lenny’s mother, through the insult, re-adopts the very patriarchal discourse
she initially challenges, the economic value of which she appears reminded by the arrival of her patriarch.

The conditions around the insult resonate with an earlier episode in which Lenny hints at the performative aspects of her father’s masculine authority:

Mother and Father are standing at the opposite ends of their joined beds. “Janoo! Don’t tease me like this ... I know you’ve got it: I saw it!”

Mother’s voice teeters between amusement and a wheedling whine. She is a virtuoso at juggling the range of her voice and achieving the exact balance with which to handle Father. Father has the knack of extracting the most talented of performances from us all—and from all those who work for him. (76)

Here, Lenny’s mother—a “virtuoso” who “juggles” her voice (76)—performs her role as sexual plaything for her husband, himself a sort of phallic ringmaster who draws out the self-subordinating speech acts of those who perform their respective social roles under his authority. Just as Lenny’s mother berates Imam Din for his “womanliness,” she enunciates here the imperative that maintains the sexually-ordered, hypermasculine symbolic order of Lenny’s household.

I do not mean to suggest that the world of the novel circulates within the heterosexist authority of Lenny’s home. What I am concerned with, rather, is the way in which sexual violence, the symbolic order of patriarchal authority, male and female bodies, ethnicity, class, race, and women’s agency qua biopolitical subjecthood struggle with and against each other as discursive forces across the field of India’s conservative-nationalist project in the immediate moment of Indian/Pakistani independence.

Mimicry

I will return to gossip and nationalist politics momentarily, but I would like first to return to Forster clear up some issues concerning Barnett-Woods’ engagement with Homi Bhaba’s concepts of mimicry and ambivalence. Barnett-Woods understands these concepts as lynchpins for Aziz and Fielding’s friendship that, like gossip, undermine Anglo-Indian authority. Observing that Fielding is something of an outlier because of his friendship with Aziz, Barnett-Woods states that the friendship 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). (64)

I would contend, however, that there is nothing exceptional about Fielding’s instability qua subject before the Crown on its own

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terms. Yes, Fielding is something of a social outlier and this stigmatizes him, but he knows his limits and he never exceeds them; hence the social membrane that distances him from Aziz throughout the narrative as a whole, regardless of how much Fielding expresses his desire for Aziz’s intimacy. Furthermore, Barnett-Woods’ interpretation of Bhabhian ambivalence suggests that ambivalence as such negates power, but power does not work this way: rather, subjects are always and already unstable before the discursive power networks they embody. From this common position of instability, the text invites us to think through how its characters negotiate abstract power through its concretized expression of the social roles and political structures that mediate and set limits upon the relationships between those characters.  

Barnett-Woods demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of both mimicry and ambivalence as abstract theoretical constructions, but she sometimes overlooks the historical processes that determine these terms when she applies them to Forster and extrapolates outward. Concerning the way that mimicry “poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (Bhabha qtd. in Barnett-Woods 62), Barnett-Woods claims that

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\text{[t]he 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. (62)}\]

When Bhabha speaks of mimicry, he implicitly refers to a specific class of Indian men—most commonly in Bengal and the northern provinces—who enjoyed access to certain British cultural institutions like education and the arts. However, Bhabha’s tendency toward abstraction obfuscates how mimic men are supposed to register politically, or, for that matter, in any realm beyond some imagined Oedipal economy of subconscious white male anxiety specific to Bhabha’s personal interpretations of Freudian psychoanalysis. Because of this, mimicry does not easily “destabilize the imperialists’ set of values and epistemic systems of cultural identity” in any specific, concrete, material sense. I similarly doubt that we can talk about any period of India’s colonial history according to the deterministic and historically bereft binary of colonizer and colonized that Bhabhian-style criticism sometimes invites.

Mimicry and menace, at least conceptually, signal a rupture within the tautological imperative of colonialism as an ideological project that ultimately funneled into the state-oriented economy of industrial capitalism more generally. The mimic man, “almost the same but not quite,” in this context repeats but does not represent his colonial master. Menace swirls into existence at this moment of imperfect mimesis. Before his colonial overlord, the deviation formative to the mimic man renders explicit a caricature: the racially marked body of the non-white male who strives to reproduce his white, patriarchal, and racist master’s white, patriarchal, and racist system. Since the
mimic man’s body constitutes a sort of living carnival mirror for the colonizer’s body, the mimic man always and already harbours the implicit terms. Yes, Fielding is something of a social outlier and this stigmatizes him, but he knows his limits and he never exceeds them; hence the social membrane that distances him from Aziz throughout the narrative as a whole, regardless of how much Fielding expresses his desire for Aziz’s intimacy. Furthermore, Barnett-Woods’ interpretation of Bhabhian ambivalence suggests that ambivalence as such negates power, but power does not work this way: rather, subjects are always and already unstable before the discursive power networks they embody. From this common position of instability, the text invites us to think through how its characters negotiate abstract power through its concretized expression of the social roles and political structures that mediate and set limits upon the relationships between those characters.  

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of the non-white male who strives to reproduce his white, patriarchal, and racist master’s white, patriarchal, and racist system. Since the mimic man’s body constitutes a sort of living carnival mirror for the colonizer’s body, the mimic man always and already harbours the implicit threat of ideological subversion. This embodied representation (or “menace” qua “irreverence,” in Bhabha-speak) of the imperialist master’s ideals vis-à-vis ideology, the argument goes, renders explicit the spuriousness of ideological false-consciousness, underneath which some authentic superstructure of reality supposedly lurks. This clears a space for further Bhabhian moves like ambivalence and third-space. But this analysis begs all sorts of questions, and Bhabha’s habitual appeal to jargon only further clouds his reasoning. How is the mimic man, as the body that instantiates his master’s absurd ideological cloak, supposed to threaten the everyday workings of capitalism in any practical sense? In the language of poststructuralism, we could argue that the mimic man exposes the simulacral veneer of ideology, but this sort of a claim does not get us very far when we analyze the manifold tensions and contradictions formative to any question about the history of Indian nationalist struggle.

With that said, Barnett-Woods does acknowledge “the multitudinous racial groups that were affected by the [1947] partition” of India and Pakistan (69). As I explain below, the very terms upon which nationalism and popular resistance are mobilized render any discussions about them unstable from the start. This throws mimicry as a subversive phenomenon into question. To demonstrate what I mean by the real complexities that fuel the ongoing debates about resistance and assimilation in colonial India, I would like to turn for a moment to the problem of nationalism and reform in the context of 19th century Bengal. In her discussion of Shakespeare’s tremendous popularity amongst Bengal’s literary elite in the 19th century, Jyotsana Singh points out that many Bengali bourgeois—those subjects of the “civilizing mission” that constituted potential “conduits for Western ideas”—embraced Shakespeare as a representative of cultural identity to put them on equal footing with the British (123). Indeed, the Anglo-Indian project of constructing English-educated babus “offered a program of building a new man who would feel himself a citizen of the world while the very face of the world was being constructed in the mirror of the dominant culture of the West” (Loomba qtd. in Singh 131). A Bhabhain aporia if ever there were one. However, the establishment of Western cultural institutions in the early 19th century also struggled with considerable pushback from the local bourgeoisie. Partha Chatterjee, who theorizes the gendered separation of India’s material and spiritual spheres as formative to struggles for nationhood in the Bengali context, describes the way “[a]n entire institutional network of [Bengali] printing presses, publishing houses, newspapers, magazines, and literary societies” established itself “outside the purview of the state and European missionaries” (The Nation and its Fragments 7). Bengali theatre and novels, for example, borrowed from both ancient traditions and from contemporary European forms. However, such apparent counter-discourses also operated under exclusionary or oppressive auspices that
“conspicuously” adhered to “caste distinctions and patriarchal forms of authority in the family” (Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” 235). Hence, those very plays that borrowed irreverently from Western and traditional forms also forwarded a distinctly conservative social agenda in which the domestic sphere secured restrictions of caste, class, and gender. The theatrical trope of the Bengali woman absurdly imitating the memsahib, for instance, was calculated to evoke laughter as an interpellative tool that warned its audiences against the dangers of subscribing to any liberal Western ideals about women that the Bengali establishment perceived as a threat to certain longstanding norms. Hence, while Western-educated Bengali men strove for liberal reform at the level of public institutions, they also strove for limited and controlled emancipation for women, a social outlook in lock-step with older forms of power that sidestepped European liberalism and at the same time restricted women to the domestic sphere. What I want to emphasize here is that mimicry alone cannot account for the myriad cultural and political formations that culminated in Bengali sovereignty struggles, or, for that matter, populist movements invested in issues of caste and gender that far exceeded the demands set out by the Indian National Congress.

In thinking through the overall question of Indian struggles for sovereignty that had begun to foment by the latter 19th century, then, the problem does not lie so much in “our inability to think out new forms of the modern community,” but rather in the limits of a “theoretical language” that, if left unchecked, does not provide us with the space to think through the contradictions embedded in the confrontations inherent to the dialectic of “community and state” (Chatterjee, Nation 11). My point—as Foucault most famously formulated—is that power and resistance are not stable categories. Rather, both power and resistance proliferate through struggles within and across overdetermined discursive networks that often collide and conflict with one another, even when they ostensibly operate under the same ideological umbrella. It is true that mimic men implicitly force the administrative superstructure to correct for its own inconsistencies in the very production of those mimic men, and it is also true that the mass surges for independence mobilized by Congress in the spirit of Gandhi and Nehru came about from Western education and extensive expertise about the European judiciary. However, in the Indian context, class, gender, and caste constitute unique institutional variables that, in all sorts of ways, determine issues like who gets to learn and who does not. The revolutionary timbre that characterizes both mimic men and our mainstream histories about interwar mass movements (such as non-cooperation and Quit India) does not account for the further power discrepancies amongst the Indian people themselves, particularly the intense oppression imposed upon women and the rural and urban poor by native elites.5

Finally, a Bhabhian critique of power must also contend with the fact that the concepts it celebrates—fluidity, ambivalence, and, perhaps most notoriously, hybridity—constitute the very means through which global capital, in all its ahistoricity, duplicates itself.6 On one hand, as Hardt and Negri remind us, “[t]he affirmation of hybridities and the

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free play of differences across boundaries is liberatory only in a context where power poses hierarchy exclusively through essential identities, binary divisions, and stable oppositions”—a totalitarian and totalizing ideological bogeyman who pulls the strings of capitalism, so to speak. On the other hand, if neoliberalism and the global market exploit and produce the very aporias, ambiguities, and in-between states that postmodernists and theorists of hybridity of the (old) New Left deploy to reveal our ideological false-consciousness, how are we to interpret Bhabha’s celebration of these concepts as politically subversive, counter-discursive, contestatory, or any other quasi-intellectual nom de rigueur we throw about? Given the political vacuum that has followed the collapse of the welfare state and subsequent dissolution of the public sphere into the private, the corporate into the philanthropic, and—most frightening of all—the ecological into the economic, it is little wonder that, in the midst of our collective social and moral vertigo, we lack any real means with which to coherently talk about ideology, politics, or, for that matter, popular revolt.

All of this is to say that we cannot address Indian resistance or Anglo-Indian hegemony without first taking into account the infinitely complex formations in which class, caste, gender, and race—amongst the British and the Indians but also amongst the myriad Indian peoples, especially those groups who endured for centuries under Moghul and Hindu rule—are intertwined in history. Grand claims about history’s “fluidity” or “decenteredness” depoliticize and de-historicize these issues from the start. This is not an attack on Bhabha per se, and it is certainly not an attack on theory or continental philosophy; rather, my reservations here come about from the too-quick deployment of controversial theorists (of which Bhabha is amongst the most notorious examples) without a clear account of why theory does or has mattered over the last thirty or so years.

An economy of gossip?

In closing, I would like to shift away from Bhabha and return to the potential intersection between gossip and nationalist politics. I am very interested in Barnett-Woods’ claim that “gossip and rumour can be constructed as alternative and even dissident discourses to the Anglo-centric and hegemonic narratives of ‘imperialism’ and ‘nation’” (62). But I think this is not so much a question of “The Anglo-centric” or “The Hegemonic” so much as it is a question of analyzing how the East India Company and the Crown controlled and suppressed certain types of language that they saw, for one reason or other, as threatening to their interests. If we think about the circulation of gossip as a sort of trade in illicit speech, how might such illicit speech be reconstituted before a disciplinary body? What could a sustained engagement with gossip ruled as seditious activity tell us about John Adams’ 1823 ruling in which printers were required to have a license, the Vernacular Press Act imposed by Lord Lytton in 1878, or, perhaps most notoriously, the Press Act of 1910? I do not have the space to get into specific histories or case studies here, but I would, by way of conclusion, like to offer a few preliminary remarks about how we might start to theorize
gossip and rumour when they encounter the disciplining gaze of the Raj’s interests. This raises several questions. Does gossip constitute a fixed signifier that necessarily destabilizes a given discursive formation, or does it circulate in different sorts of ways, and to different ends, depending on who whispers to whom? Does idle chatter escalate to the status of gossip when it encounters a certain social threshold? Do rumours or gossip circulate in the same way and for the same ends amongst different discursive groups separated by class, gender, race, and caste strata—or do we need to clear a space for multiple economies of gossip contingent on where and how they circulate? Can we talk about a social division of labour particular to gossip? How might we measure gossip in terms of its value and circulation? To be clear, I am not speaking of particular instances of gossip or rumour here, but rather of how the circulation of gossip in general can prise open fissures or inconsistencies within a power relation that appears inviolable. This is certainly not to say that gossip’s political deployment is simply anti-hegemonic in the crude sense; nor do I mean to suggest that the structural fissures out of which gossip arises are necessarily visible or exposed from the start. What I wish to do, rather, is to provisionally theorize a means by which to think through the real historical outcomes that can follow a rumour’s circulation, with particular attention to the social relations from which that rumour materializes.

I want to briefly turn to the economist J.C. Kumarappa, who, in 1945’s *Economy of Permanence*, made a rather remarkable observation about Marx’s formulation of value and context. To understand the abstract qualities that determine a given object’s exchange value, Kumarappa posits, we have to first engage the social division of labour in which that object circulates to determine the qualities relevant to exchange value in that context. For instance, an historian of Egypt will figure age as a property in his or her overall equation of an artefact’s value in the commodities market for Egyptian artefacts. That is, time expressed as age becomes a factor in the artefact’s alienated figuration of exchange value for the historian in a way that time expressed as age would not influence, say, a farmer’s figuration of a crop’s value at harvest time. So we have a given use-value, be it Egyptian artefact or corn, but its entry into the commodities market is determined by figurations of value that are deemed relevant by a select group of people who participate in the local division of labour. However, these heterogeneous figurations funnel into a calculation of exchange value that puts all of its objects on a shared, homogenous plane of alienated value in the commodities market. Put another way, use-value—as it always has been—is embedded in exchange-value, but the abstract qualities upon which use-value finds its alienated expression as exchange value differ incommensurably between objects, determined as such by the localized social division of labour, while nevertheless contributing to the same generalized, abstract circuit of commodity exchange.

Taking the analogy slightly further, Kumarappa describes how the tension between use-value and exchange-value differs from context to context. A rupee represents food to a peasant living on the margins of society, but that same rupee represents a
commodity to be invested for more rupees to a stockbroker; in other words, the same exchange-object assumes two different valences for two different people. Yet the logic of capital accepts both of these figurations in the context of the commodities market, and both of these figurations likewise contribute to the commodity’s value as such. The contradiction that Kumarappa draws out is essentially materialist: value is predicated on social relations, but the sum total of social relations that determine value as such is, itself, simultaneously over- and underdetermined.

How might this quandary apply to something like gossip or rumour as a form of exchange that, in the context of colonial power, is labelled (or “valorized,” to keep with the Marxian analogy) as a threat, as seditious speech, as filth? Does rumour circulate across and within multiple social strata according to the same peculiar logic as the commodities market? Does a piece of gossip’s value shift according to the power formations through which it circulates? In posing these questions, I speak here, I suppose, of a political economy of rumour, but in making this suggestion I do not mean to imply that rumour as such is reducible to culture as an alienated expression of use-value in an Adornian sense. What I am interested in, rather, is the way that rumours or gossip, in their concretization according to a given set of static qualities—along the lines of say, seditious hearsay, unsanctioned whisperings, an inassimilable symbolic excess, dirt as “matter out of place,” or whatever else—end up both destabilizing and reconstituting the social circuits through which they flow. What, then, is gossip’s power?

Forster’s choice to pursue the problem of intimacy and Indian nationalism through a narrative about an English educator’s rocky friendship with a Muslim man has not been lost on commentators. Frances B. Singh argues that Aziz’s political outlook “restructures” itself according to “Gandhian lines at the end of the novel” (268). Aziz’s passion for Persian verse remains, however, and this suggests to Singh a distinction between aesthetics and politics in which “a Muslim can develop and retain an identity—the great concern of the Young Partymen,” an Islamic separatist group—“without resorting to political separatism, the division of India along religious lines.” (268). Nirad Chaudhuri offers a less charitable assessment of Aziz and his friends as “inverted toadies” who “belong to the servile section” (22). The Hindu Godbole, a “clown” (21), likewise does not fare much better under Chaudhuri’s assessment. Chaudhuri’s complaint rests in what he sees as a “humanitarian prepossession” that “leads Forster to waste his politico-ethical emotion on persons who do not deserve it” (20).

In speaking here of gender and performance under the rubric of speech acts, I have in mind Elizabeth Grosz’s formulation of a heteropatriarchal economy in which the figure of the woman, castrated though she is, “accepts her castrated position as fait accompli” in this signifying system (Grosz 132). As Judith Butler points out, if the feminine figure must accede to her castration, then she is always and already in violation of the Law; she has transgressed before she has even been marked as a “she.” This is so because some prior body has “failed to perform its castration in accord with the symbolic law” (Butler 104). The violation is necessarily implied, even if the logic behind the violation appears to beg the question vis-à-vis corporeality and language, or launch an infinite regress of violating bodies that are always and already prior to the subject. In response to her compromised position as such, the woman develops into a seduc-
tress so that she may become the phallus for the masculine other who strives to have it. That is to say, she assumes the position of the phallus precisely because the phallus is what she is not (Grosz 132-133).

3 Of course, “power” itself is heterogeneous, disparate, and contingent; I use it in the singular here as a matter of convenience.

4 We could, alternatively, follow Slavoj Žižek’s suggestion that false-consciousness is moot, given that we knowingly buy into ideology’s exploitative logic from the start (The Sublime Object of Ideology 24-30).

5 Indeed, such contingencies brought together a diverse array of scholars—including Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, and Partha Chatterjee—under the auspices of the Subaltern studies group in the early 1980s. The Subalternists sought to unearth the “residuum of a dismembered past” (Guha 37), and in so doing, contest the homogenous and homogenizing impulses of elitist historiographies that erected elite Indians such as Gandhi and Nehru as heroes in the annals of history whilst effacing “the small voice of history,” the everyday experiences of women, children, rural peasants, the urban proletariat, low-born castes, and other marginalized figures who worked, lived, and participated in the oceanic mass of India’s nationalist struggle from 1857 onward.

6 Žižek’s charge that Deleuze is an “ideologist of late capitalism” (Organs without Bodies 184) might well apply to Bhabha in this instance.
Works Cited


