

Postcolonial Illuminations of Past Betrayals in Tan's *The Gift of Rain* and Owuor's *Dust*

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ABSTRACT

In addressing contemporary developments in theoretical postcolonial studies in tandem with analyses of two twenty-first century postcolonial novels, Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust*, this article attempts to identify growth points in both the discursive and the aesthetic dimensions of postcolonial work. The main focus of the article is on broadly parallel presentations (by a Malaysian and a Kenyan author, respectively) of characters seen as having betrayed anti-imperial or anti-colonial initiatives. Such characters' struggles, years later, to come to terms with shame and guilt for cruelly violent and bloody acts in which they were involved through their close association with particular foreign figures demonstrate both individual and social imperatives to acknowledge historical harms in order to achieve (self-)forgiveness and atonement.

The article presents as "new" and as a quality advancing, deepening and maturing understanding of the colonial past and of local collaborators' roles, the novelists' complex, empathetic representation of the betrayer figures—and, to a lesser extent, of the foreigners with whom they had aligned themselves. It is argued that the kind of postcolonial theory most closely commensurable with novels like Tan's and Owuor's is best suited to contribute to improving understanding of the colonial past and the postcolonial present in their baffling complexity. Theorists reading recent postcolonial novels as primarily addressing wealthy or "Western" readerships are by contrast seen as limiting or hampering the literary-critical as well as socio-political grasp of authors' contributions to widening the dimensions of postcolonial work. The novels are viewed as promoting greater historical understanding as well as improving our grasp of the challenges of the postcolonial present, and as memorable works of literary art.

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One thread of the “double” argument presented in this article traces the growth points as well as the places of stasis in literary postcolonial studies (conceived as inclusive of theory and criticism)—to the extent that these practices appear either to enlarge understanding of a multiplicity of evolving postcolonial situations, or to curtail them. My evaluation estimates the extent to which theoretical-critical positions work co-operatively with postcolonial creative writing or (in my view) fail to pay sufficiently respectful attention to the achievements and vision of creative writers from postcolonial societies. Stuart Hall’s insistence¹ that “We cannot afford to forget the determining effects of the colonial moment” (249) remains salutary, but how that “colonial moment” is represented and understood has changed. More recent postcolonial writing accords with Arjun Appadurai’s recognition that “global cultural flows . . . have entered into the manufacture of local subjectivities” (64). This manifests in such texts’ significantly restructured envisioning of both the colonial past and the postcolonial present. As both Tan’s and Owuor’s novels demonstrate, twenty-first century postcolonial authors represent the imperial and colonial encounters in their respective countries’ histories in more inclusive ways, employing morally and politically more complex assessments of how the foreign powers managed to enter and permeate local societies. They do so by centring on local characters who play the role of betrayers of their own communities. These two texts are hence read as embodying a contemporary redefinition of the work of the postcolonial novel, and the analysis of their complex moral interrogation of personal, familial, social and political histories of local societies’ interaction with outside forces and their representatives constitutes the second thread of this essay’s argument.

The role played by local subjects’ betrayals has long been noted by postcolonial authors such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (*A Grain of Wheat*, 1967) and Rohinton Mistry (*A Fine Balance*, 1995). In twenty-first century writing by postcolonial authors,² it is the centralization of the betrayer character and notably the empathetic portrayal of such a figure that seems a more recent development in the field. Re-examination of the betrayer figure allows more differentiated views of the rupture of a society’s fabric by the hugely intrusive

¹ Stuart Hall responded in his article to other postcolonial theorists and critics such as Ella Shohat, Anne McClintock, Robert Young and (particularly and most extensively) Arif Dirlik.

² Such as Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans*, Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* and perhaps also his *Warlight*, Goldman’s *The Long Night of White Chickens*, Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man*, Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* and Vera’s *The Stone Virgins*—i.e., over a “world-wide” range of postcolonial regions.

processes of colonization and imperialist occupation, countering politically and morally simplistic descriptions of the aggressive assumption of control by a villainous external greater power and their victimization of an innocent and passive local population. The complex dimensions and nuances of betrayal³ are best understood by invoking the portmanteau term “psychosocial” (Frosh 1). By indicating the inextricable intertwinement of the psychological (individual) with the social (familial, communal, societal and political) dimensions of human thought, emotion, conduct and experience, the term applies to the ways in which political betrayals both deeply affect and implicate individuals’ psyches and their personal relationships. I use the notion of betrayal here to point to the way Philip (in *The Gift of Rain*) horrifies his British family by accepting employment with the Japanese occupying forces as well as the way the local Chinese community (to which he is affiliated through his deceased mother) labels him a despicable “running dog” (Tan 293).⁴ In *Dust*, Nyipir’s work for the British colonialists likewise casts him in the role of a traitor to the Kenyan anti-colonial struggle, whereas his membership in the “wrong” tribe (during the period immediately subsequent to formal decolonization when the Kikuyu effectively ruled), along with his refusal to take the blood-oath of loyalty to this group, cost him his job as a police officer and result in his torture and disfigurement, sexual impotence, and the eventual break-up of his marriage.

Novels like *The Gift of Rain* and *Dust*, in depicting the painful memory-work of protagonists recounting and interpreting personal, familial, social and political histories, consider in particular the ethical implications of these histories. The writers cast light on unacknowledged and still poorly understood past choices, events and processes. These developments in postcolonial writing signpost possible political and moral growth in formerly colonized societies that are beginning to take ownership *also* of periods and processes of colonial

³ It has been said that no readily accessible definition of the wide-ranging concept of betrayal exists, since even philosophers who engage with the notion argue “that trust and betrayal are best understood through a careful reading of literature,” since “in literature unlike philosophy trust and betrayal are common themes” (Jackson 74). Jackson references in particular a chapter by Judith Shklar and a book by Peter Johnson as philosophical texts employing literary references to attempt to define “betrayal,” but states that neither provides “a detailed discussion of what ‘betrayal’ means” (73). Jackson’s comments are valid; more useful in its analyses of a wide variety of historical betrayers/traitors is Ben-Yehuda’s book, which emphasizes that (while recognizing the broad range and ambiguities of the “betrayal” concept) the category normally applies to those who are seen as violating the trust in their loyalty held by individuals or communities and consequently viewed as major moral transgressors.

⁴ The term “running dog” was often used by communists to refer to those deemed traitors for kowtowing to the enemy for selfish gain. Philip’s father tells him: “you have betrayed all of us, all the people of Penang” (Tan 277)—naming the island on which the novel is set.

or imperial invasion. These societies are no longer portrayed as the mere locus or receivers of the invaders' incursions. Such narrative recognition of local historical responsibility in facilitations of major political incursions depicts local characters as implicated and involved in these processes, which are now seen as messier and murkier than in former clear-cut accounts that apportioned blame almost exclusively to foreigners. It is imperative that postcolonial theory should keep pace with these developments and enlargements in perspective, and that a narrowly moralistic binary be supplanted by more nuanced understanding of how intertwined alien and local cultures and imperatives together brought about the enormous changes wrought by colonialism. Political and literary scholars who theorize colonial processes and their after-effects would do well to heed Judith Butler's recognition of "the psychic registers in which social forms of power take hold" (Butler viii), as the creative writers have long since understood. I would highlight Butler's brief reference to "forms of power" manifesting in "psychic registers" for the way this accords with recent postcolonial novels' balancing of political force-fields with relationships between colonizers and colonized (willy-nilly or by choice, painful or through seductions of various kinds) in nuanced evocations.

In his *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*, Dominick LaCapra suggests that "the most difficult and moving words of testimony involve not claims of truth but experiential 'evidence'—the apparent reliving of the past, as a witness, means going back to an unbearable scene, being overwhelmed by emotion and for a time unable to speak" (131). This brief excerpt from LaCapra's text, intended of course to inform studies of "real-life" trauma, is strikingly applicable to the novels' portrayals of protagonists' anguished confessions of contamination by and participation in brutal, violent deeds committed against compatriots and at the behest of invading powers' representatives. The quotation accords with the practice of long-held silences by both Philip Khoo-Hutton and Nyipir Oganda within their respective Malaysian and Kenyan contexts—silences testifying to the anguishing shame and guilt of men who for years could not bear to admit to or recount the roles they had played during terrible times of fraught history and social splintering under the impact of outside forces entering their countries.⁵ An instructive

⁵ Contemporary postcoloniality is also manifesting itself in more widespread acknowledgement in and by some of the formerly invading countries—such as the reparations paid to Kenyan victims of British colonial atrocities, and more widespread, public acknowledgement of the darker aspects of their countries' colonial activities—e.g., in France, Italy and Germany, where colonial harms committed by

fictional parallel occurs in Chinua Achebe's 1987 novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, where the narrative moves from the assertion that "Recalling-Is-Greatest" (124)⁶ to the question raised near the end of the novel: "What must a people do to appease an embittered history?" (220). This describes an arc from recounting the past as heroic to the as yet unfulfilled task of addressing the complexity and moral murkiness of such a history by acknowledging local participation in the creation of that "story." Such a process is as essential to the possible restitution or achievement of a just social order as it is to the individual's psychic health. In the words of Maria Pia Lara: "the public domain is the centre of self-understanding" (109).⁷

A particularly fine example of a postcolonial writer's daring ability to evoke a perpetrator-figure from within without using conventional condemnatory techniques of distancing that work primarily to horrify readers occurs in the Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera's depiction of a rebel to the postcolonial rulers who commits vividly portrayed acts of murder and rape (in her *The Stone Virgins*, 2002). Evoking such horrifying acts in an unblurred way so as to confront the reader (local or international) with their awful violence, *even as* the author achieves what has been called the "de-othering of the perpetrator" (Gagiano, "De-Othering" 187; "Reading" 67),⁸ is a more intense illustration of a perspective resembling Owuor's and Tan's centralization of betraying figures involved in atrocities. Such evocations compel us to stand in perpetrators' shoes, making the awfulness of perpetrations exemplary in a different way—not merely to horrify, but to caution us against the moral evasiveness of persistently othering perpetrators and reminding us that forgetting our own capacity for harmful collaboration is a type of hypocrisy. Postcolonial authors doing the difficult political, conceptual and moral work that is needed to help societies heal from history's wounding by means of their verbal art are important social actors and public intellectuals. It is as verbal works of art that I approach the two novels of my choice—texts whose

their emissaries were formerly not well known or much subjected to public interrogation. Japanese compensation to Korean "comfort women" is another example.

⁶ "Recalling" here indicates the function of the [artist as] storyteller or historian, contrasted with the roles of the warrior and the worker in their respective contributions to society.

⁷ Lara's focus in her study is on feminist narratives, but her vision is expandable to texts like Tan's and Owuor's, that are not primarily feminist.

⁸ "She [Vera] is 'de-othering' the aggressor-perpetrator to move us with a sense of Sibaso's own deprivation and unassuageable need as a person uncared for, unloved, unhealed—even as we are frightened and horrified (as Nonceba necessarily is) by his 'capacity for harm' (Gagiano, "Reading" 67). Compare Gagiano "De-Othering" (198-99).

demanding moral interrogations challenge our tendency to prefer politically simplistic portrayals of terrible periods, rendered in facile, often racially, nationally or ethnically compartmentalized or coded value judgements, and accordingly blame or praise moralistically and superficially. Contemporary postcolonial authors like Vera, Tan and Owuor compellingly demonstrate a profound depth and subtlety in their explorations, as they seek to understand the ways in which protagonists came to occupy the traitor/perpetrator positions that inescapably affect the rest of their lives. Authors' skill and art refuse to allow readers elsewhere, in prosperous and stable societies, to read voyeuristically, disdainfully or condescendingly. As one postcolonial historian states, it is necessary to trace "how historical memories and the shadows and ghosts of memory are internalised in our lives" and to see how "fiction may give us necessary tools" to recognize that "both colonisers and colonised are inextricably linked through their histories" (Catherine Hall 66-67).

Critical dismissals of "realistic" evocation as naïve in both thought and style by readers or critics who want postcolonial writing to "advance beyond" evocations strongly rooted in historical realities (as Tan's and Owuor's largely are) are often insufficiently attentive to the actually complex, subtle ways in which such "realities" are evoked in realist *but* visionary and eye-opening work. Fiction as an interactive art endlessly engages with an ever-changing reality as it also reconceives of "past" yet still materially and psychically "present" realities. I see postcolonial literature in the main, in future, continuing to manifest in "realist" but morally, aesthetically and politically exploratory writing. It is necessary, in theorizing the achievements and/or limitations of examples of postcolonial verbal art, to be alert to the way the most outstanding and memorable texts extend, advance, deepen and complicate our understanding of colonial and postcolonial circumstances in their full variety. Perhaps postcolonial theory in the past inadvertently encouraged a type of "distance reading" which in turn facilitated the unfortunate tendency to homogenize postcolonial fiction. The present article attempts to demonstrate how rewarding and how important it is to follow the imaginative reach and depth of individual texts even in comparative reading. This cannot be done without engaging with the verbal and stylistic detail of each text and can only happen if authorial integrity and seriousness are respected. In the major texts, fictional representations are challenging *re*considerations that explore our pasts

and our contemporary “realities” ever more probingly and over a wider historical and geographical spectrum.

In this regard, the matter of readership links with the query concerning *for* and not only *of* whom the postcolonial authors may be writing. Attendant issues involve the often vexed matter of markets, publishers’ selections and literary prizes amidst widespread accusations of postcolonial writers’ deliberate appeals to “Western” readers’ alleged preferences for particular kinds of “exotic” fictions or even for so-called “trauma porn.” Points raised *inter alia* by Graham Huggan, Sarah Brouillette, Eileen Julien (“Extroverted,” 2006), Akin Adesokan and Nathan Suhr-Sytsma regarding “Western” marketability as a factor in both what and how postcolonial authors are writing need to be taken seriously. Yet it is vital to guard against a type of “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur 33, 35; Felski)⁹ which tends to cloud contemporary postcolonial theories and reading practices. Such an insistence on the primacy given by postcolonial writers to “Western” publishers and readers is often insulting, demeaning and homogenizing, and possibly implicitly racist and condescending. I call such allegations insulting because they imply firstly that such texts cannot appeal to readers primarily by the strength of the authors’ literary art. These are also shocking imputations not only of an absence of literary and imaginative creativity, but of moral integrity. They fail to consider how profoundly postcolonial novels’ contents and the ways in which they portray local subjects and raise historical issues *matter* to local readerships and to the authors themselves. Pertinent to readings of cultural exchanges between “the West and the rest” is Arjun Appadurai’s statement that “the forms of circulation continue to interact with the circulation of forms to produce unexpected new cultural configurations in which locality always takes surprising new forms” (299). Weihsin Gui describes “engagement with what lies beyond the nation’s symbolic and territorial boundaries” as “a literary cosmopolitics” and he mentions “the overlapping [of] national and transnational frameworks” (“Ethnographic Tactics” 172), while Madhu Krishnan remarks on the “‘multifocality’ of contemporary African literature” (147).¹⁰ It is right and valid that postcolonial authors address the powerful and

⁹ See Ricoeur 33, 35 and Felski’s article “Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion.”

¹⁰ Compare Suhr-Sytsma, and Eileen Julien’s concluding remarks (in her response to his article) concerning the “prestige, portability, translatability, global reach—much of this due to capitalism” of the contemporary (including the postcolonial) novel (“Extroverted African Novel, Revisited” 9). See

formerly colonizing societies as much as their own. It must be recognized that when theorists impute to postcolonial novelists a “playing up to” “Western” or wealthy readerships by way of “exoticizing” colonial histories and postcolonial societies, they overlook the point that critical reinterpretations of historical conditions in postcolonial creative texts *also* implicate and critique the world’s dominant societies. Novels like *The Gift of Rain* and *Dust* derive their intense affectivity from the authors’ profound caring about their societies of origin. Their writing manifests their awareness of authorial responsibility towards these sites within global historical and contemporary contexts. Both Tan’s and Owuor’s novels have received much respectful attention.¹¹ As postcolonial scholars we would do well to take our cue from the assumption of the authority to speak of and to the postcolonial societies as much as to the “metropolitan centres” manifested in texts like Tan’s, Owuor’s and others. Postcolonial writing is a necessary and important part of “world literature” in that the unique problems of the regions depicted in postcolonial works affect and concern not only those societies, but, in different or in surprisingly similar ways, also matter to formerly and formally colonizing societies.¹² Texts with the kind of amplitude and weight of Tan’s and Owuor’s are also worthy “world” texts in terms of their complex and nuanced literary art.

The creative choice by both authors is to use their main local protagonists to frame the chronotope (Bakhtin 84)¹³ that the text encompasses. Both authors have thought deeply about the infiltration processes that allow foreign nations to come into and take over/overtake other people’s territories and sovereignty in ways other than and apart from overwhelming power advantages. The literary representation of psychosocial perspectives pervades both novels, indicating the oscillating balance between personal (experiential) perspectives and recognition of the social (including political) forces and energies that

also Philip Holden’s comment that “the fate of the global Malaysian novel” (such as Tan’s) “does not make it less Malaysian” (57).

¹¹ On Tan’s novel I accessed Dasenbrock, Gui (“Ethnographic”), Holden, Lim, and Leon and Koh. Owuor’s more recent novel has had numerous glowing reviews; more scholarly responses include those by Griffiths, Kenny and Kosgei, and more analyses of this text will undoubtedly follow.

¹² See Trinh Minh-ha’s caution against the “simplistic” ways in which “marginalised” cultures tend to “name the centralised cultures,” while reminding us that one needs also “to face—rather than to escape—the historical situation that contributes to understanding how the notion of the West can, or has become, monolithic as to its ‘others’” (15).

¹³ In Bakhtin’s famous expression, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” is the title and the topic of one of the four essays in the edited collection of four of his essays. The term “chronotope” (as its etymology indicates) denotes the ways in which successful novels combine vivid evocations of particular *time-periods* with powerful renditions of setting or location (*places*).

impact on individual lives and choices. It is notable that both Philip and Nyipir can be described as “father-seeking” figures: Philip’s father, mourning for his late wife, is distant and seemingly detached; Nyipir’s father enlists for the British forces sent to Burma in WWII when Nyipir is a little boy, and never returns. No close family member is available to either youngster to compensate for the psychologically or physically absent father.¹⁴ Both Philip and Nyipir experience a further deprivation of familial love and closeness. As the youngest and only half-Chinese sibling among the four Hutton children in a British family, Philip feels himself to be an outsider, whereas Nyipir, orphaned as a boy, is exposed to the exploitation, neglect and cruelty of a greedy uncle who steals his inheritance and whose home he has to flee in fear of having murdered his abuser in self-defence against violent and unjust punishment. Hence the vulnerability of both protagonists to dangerous, glamorous and somewhat seductive father surrogates. Nothing as crude as simple allegory¹⁵ happens in either text; instead, the reader is given angles from which to comprehend the kinds of betrayal that haunt them. The significant parallel is that, in order to fill these yawning emotional gaps in their lives, both Philip and Nyipir serve and align themselves with older and foreign men who happen to be members of the nations that invaded their countries. Nevertheless, notions of commitment and of betrayal are further complicated in both texts in that Philip and Nyipir also love and admire other father figures, and both in due course divest or attempt to divest their loyalties from the main surrogate fathers and authority figures depicted—the Japanese official Hayato Endo in *The Gift of Rain* and the British police officer Hugh Bolton in *Dust*.

In addition to the points outlined above allowing protagonists’ detachment from their “own” people, the further parallel between the protagonists’ situations is that neither has a secure “ethnic nest”¹⁶ or sense of belonging with other Chinese, Malaysians or British (in Philip’s case), or with indigenous Kikuyu or *other* Luo people (in Nyipir’s case). Both Philip and Nyipir are

¹⁴ Both Philip and Nyipir lose their mothers as boys around seven years old; Philip has no close relationships with his three older half-siblings, while Nyipir’s older brother accompanies their father to Burma without either of them returning, and the boy is placed under the authority of a cruel uncle.

¹⁵ By “allegory” in this context I refer hypothetically to a representational trope whereby the protagonists might “stand for” the society, or their lives parallel its broader history. Compare Holden (56), who makes a similar point, but from a different angle.

¹⁶ I use the term “nest” to highlight the fact that both Penang/Malaya and Kenya (at the different times portrayed) were and are multi-ethnic and politically fissured societies, in which the ethnic group of one’s origin normally represents a socially and politically safe space of acceptance and nurture.

empathetically portrayed in their somewhat uncertain claims to their respective father/motherlands. An additional pattern in the two novels' sociopolitical and historical contextualization is that neither of the local societies—Malaya or Kenya—is homogenous; indeed in both of them there are serious intranational ethnic and class tensions and rivalry as much as international animosity towards the representatives of the invading nations. In greater narrative detail, Philip works for the Japanese occupying forces in Penang as a consequence of his association with Endo-san, at the time of the brutal and bloody Japanese invasion of first China and then Malaya and their war with Britain (and its Allies), hence betraying both his Chinese mother's and his British father's people, whereas as a Luo, Nyipir's Kenyanness is contested or denied because he is not Kikuyu and refuses to take their blood-oath. Earlier, he had worked for the British colonial forces in the capture, killing and torture of Kenyan (mainly Kikuyu) resisters to colonialism who were of course labelled terrorists,¹⁷ but who later become the new power holders of the independent but still ethnically fissured nation—portrayed as ruling in vengeful ways and brooking no opposition.¹⁸ Ngũgi wa Thiong'o's famous novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) offers a different and more Kikuyu-centric perspective on the Kenyan liberation struggle than Owuor's, while also depicting failures and betrayals in empathetic ways, and other scholars have found instructive parallels (in texts such as Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory*, 2005) between Tan's and other Malaysian novelists' perspectives on the same period in their country's history.

I am not suggesting that texts like the two discussed here do not have political functions. Indeed, they distinctly document, expose and accuse the invading powers of atrocities beyond the enormous losses of indigenous lives and destruction of the property and lands of their colonised victims and the denigration of their cultures. If the texts are read in the countries of the colonial/imperial invaders, they could not be perceived as placatory; they can do politically educational work among present members of the formerly invading nations *and*—as *Dust* in particular does—critique the postcolonial

¹⁷ Claims as to how many Kenyans the British killed versus how many were killed by the Mau Mau (as Kikuyu resisters to colonialism and their allies were called) differ, ranging (for Mau Mau killings) between 1,800 and totals of 14,000. For British killings of Kenyans (mainly during the “Emergency” period), estimates range from 11 to 25 thousand.

¹⁸ Grace Musila, a South Africa based Kenyan postcolonial scholar, has termed postcolonial Kenya an “assassin state” (31).

governments of their countries. But if we see the texts fulfilling a primarily morally educational rather than predominantly political function, especially—though potentially not only—in the formerly dominated nations, we engage more closely with the unique qualities of each novel by asking how such work is done in these fictions. Novelists are not historians and each field has its own rigours and challenges, but novels like the two foregrounded in this paper do important literary-historical work in resuscitating awareness of particular fraught histories in certain geo-political areas. In brief, they create or expand historical awareness in their readers.¹⁹ Holding past conduct up to the scrutiny of the present and of the protagonists themselves and of their readers—whether local or international—they make of the protagonists witnesses in a hearing where they testify as both prosecutors and defenders of their own pasts, inextricably entangled as these are with their larger societies' pasts and presents. To have endowed the protagonists with the stature and to have allowed them the authority that Tan gives to Philip Hutton and Owuor assigns to Nyipir Oganda enables readers to respect their characters even as we flinch at depictions of remembered atrocities or moral failures and political and personal betrayals in which they participated or by which they were implicated—recognizing their shame and guilt, as well as their courage and honesty.

The cross-cultural and inter- as well as intra-national effectiveness of texts of this kind, if we agree that they have this border-crossing and time transcending ability, is of undeniable importance to a world that is in effect and has for ages been politically and economically bound together. It is especially important to read texts evoking and emanating from other(ed) cultures and distant locations attentively as they potentially contribute to the countering of complacent blindness concerning the exploitative neo-colonialisms and capitalist profiteering of the economically and politically dominant nations. Recognizing that for a text to acquire “worldliness”—which we can take to refer both to the text’s “relevance” or its interaction with and enactments of the issues and pressures of its time, and to the text’s capacity to communicate effectively with the “worlds” of readers, Shih Shu-mei voices an important point. She writes: “worldliness requires workmanship. For the work of literature, this means literariness—the attention to language and form—that

¹⁹ In his *Present Pasts* (2003), Andreas Huyssen notes that “it is precisely the function of public memory discourses to allow individuals to break out of traumatic repetitions” (9). Novels can and do surely feature among such “public memory discourses.”

makes literature literature.” She adds that “Literary texts . . . come into relation through the critic’s work” (Shih 437). She advocates the practice of “relational comparison” (431), resembling the critical methodology of the present article in its examination of the portrayal of colonial-era betrayer figures in two postcolonial texts invoking societies that are geographically and culturally far apart. Shih states that “world literary cartographies can be about the ways in which literary texts from different parts of the world relate to each other as seen through the lens of a specific . . . set of problematics” (434). Her perspective is clearly endorsed by what is undertaken in the present essay, because of her respect for the significance of literary work and her advocacy of a comparative approach.

To illustrate something of the literary art of Tan’s and Owuor’s writing and the subtlety with which they convey non-moralistic understanding of the betrayal phenomenon, I engage in some detail with a few passages from *The Gift of Rain* and *Dust*. My initial example is from Tan’s text, describing the sixteen-year-old Philip’s first encounter with the Japanese officer Hayato Endo. Philip registers instinctively that Endo is a man in full maturity, older (“in his late forties”) than Philip’s own father, one who has experienced much: his face “square and lined” (Tan 30). To Philip, Endo represents an unfamiliar ethnicity, “his accent unknown” and his eyes “round and glinting strangely in the twilight” (Tan 30). Lightly and deftly, the details indicate that Philip is impressed and intrigued by the stranger. The boy is alone at this time, having opted to remain in Penang during his father’s and siblings’ lengthy holiday in Britain, and was not aware that his father had rented out the small island near their home to Endo. The next detail shows Philip recognizing Endo’s authority, repeating his words: “‘Nevertheless, I require a boat from you,’ the strange man insisted” (30)—though Endo subsequently softens the demand with lightly self-deprecating humour. As Philip asks Endo to accompany him to the boat-house, Endo “stood unmoving, staring out to the sea and the overcast sky. ‘The sea can break one’s heart, *neh?*’” he says (30). With these unexpected words of emotional communion, the lonely, sensitive boy first registers Endo as spiritually kindred to himself; Philip says that the stranger’s words “encapsulated” his own obscure sense of the influence of the sea, with which the boy has always felt in communion. The momentousness of this encounter is beautifully and convincingly conveyed when Philip associates their meeting also with the turbulent sunset sky, an impression recalled with such vividness that it was

evidently indelible: “There was no movement except for the rain and the waves. Veins of lightning flared and throbbed behind the wall of clouds, turning the bruised sky pink, and I felt I was being granted glimpses of blood pulsing silently through the ventricles of an immense human heart” (31). When Endo tells Philip, “The sea is the only thing that joins me to my home now” (31), we may sense how subtly the description of their meeting’s backdrop indicates the youngster’s appreciation of an emotional depth and greatness in this newcomer and how honoured he feels at the man’s opening himself up, obscurely but unmistakably, to a boy he has just met. When, as they walk on, Philip slips on some stairs, “the man’s hand shot out and gripped [him] tightly,” and, says Philip, “I felt the burn where his fingers had clamped onto me” (31). Not only the physical deftness and power of his future *sensei*,²⁰ but the ambiguous—both protective and inescapable, as well as painful—bond that is lastingly established between them, is indicated here, recalling the both beautiful and ominous sky-scape²¹ seen earlier.

In *Dust*, Nyipir conveys a somewhat similar pattern unfolding from the first encounter between himself and the main “surrogate father” figure in his life, the maverick British colonial officer, Hugh Bolton. Nyipir unburdens himself of these memories while he packs the stone cairn covering the bones of Bolton, retrieved at last from the secret cave where they had lain hidden, and buried now next to the home Bolton (with Nyipir’s and others’ help) had built in the remote Turkana region of Kenya—the home that subsequently served for decades as Nyipir’s and his family’s home. Years before, Nyipir had been forced to shoot Bolton dead when the latter murderously attacked Akai, the passionate local woman who had been his mistress, when she returned after his attempted rejection. Nyipir had long loved Akai for himself and was appalled by Bolton’s abuse of her, but the shot defending Akai’s life would undoubtedly have led to a murder trial under the biased colonial authorities. Now, Akai having at last left him, Nyipir recalls Bolton in a different light:

He spoke to the bones, and Galgalu, of Hugh. “I used to be a child,”
Nyipir says, “Before I met a man who walked with power. He took

²⁰ The term means “teacher” and “mentor” and is the title by which a pupil addresses his (or her) *aikido* instructor in Japanese culture.

²¹ Note details such as “throbbed,” “bruised” and “blood” in that citation (Tan 31), which point forward to sorrow, harm and attendant guilt. Similarly, “behind the wall of clouds” suggests an as yet undisclosed purpose or menace in Philip’s meeting with Endo, as well as the fascination of mystery.

me for police training. ‘Can’t work with ‘bleddy’ civilians,’ he said—remember? I fed and washed a grown man who could kill if he wanted to—and he did. But he showed me how not to be afraid. And work, always work with Bolton. Driving. Washing dishes, clothes. Polishing brass and boots. Fetch, carry, hunt, cook, guard, light fires, set plates, boil bathwater, and set up a safari camp, walk, hunt, talk, fight, listen. And tea. At ten and at four. We hunted men,” Nyipir adds. The addiction. “This kind of thing does not end right.” (Owuor 271)

Some kind of enduring intimacy is indicated in the normally taciturn Nyipir speaking to [Hugh’s] bones “until his tongue [was] swollen” (271). This is remarkable, given his resentment at Bolton’s winning the love of Akai, whom Nyipir had desired from the first. Now, Nyipir unflinchingly credits Bolton as having made a man of him and for endowing him with his strong work ethic (despite its uglier aspects). He was clearly more a companion than a servant to Bolton on their many long, lonely treks. Nyipir’s sense of Bolton as an unforgettable person and presence in his life, and as having been something of both a father and a teacher to him, resembles Philip’s feelings for Endo.²²

In both texts, the protagonists’ eventual feelings of contamination by the betrayals, complicities and bloodshed—situations into which they were led by their association with their respective mentors—are vividly and affectively described. The acts they witnessed and in which they participated left both of them feeling anguishing guilt and shame, which they suppress for many, many years. In both texts we witness the emergence or eruption of these long-held feelings and knowledge. Philip is first shown overwhelmed by these feelings when, after the announcement of Japan’s invasion of Malaya, he realizes that through Endo he has been “linked to the war, to Japan’s ambitions” (Tan 251) by his ignorantly providing strategic information about Penang and Malaya, to Endo. Philip says: “This realization weighed me down as though I had been burdened with another identity, taken deep down to the bottom of the ocean” (Tan 251). The image of being sunk to the ocean floor simultaneously indicates

²² Nyipir nevertheless had other “father figures” and ethical models in his life, notably a murdered man, a Kikuyu teacher, who died protecting a fellow teacher murderously attacked in front of their pupils for defying the Mau Mau “blood oath.” This heroic self-sacrifice was the single factor that, long after Bolton’s death, would be the example inspiring Nyipir to stand firm in his refusal as he was grievously tortured to try and force him to take the aforementioned oath.

the weight of shame and guilt with which Philip is now burdened, and the great hurt he feels in knowing, now, that Endo has used him. Endo's presence in his life, that had given him at their meeting a sense of his life widening, opening up and intensifying, conveyed by the immensity and life he saw in the sky, has now become a suffocating sense of entrapment, as in one drowning. When he is obliged to inform his father that he will be working for the Japanese, Neil Hutton's bitter reproach, that Philip has "betrayed all of us, all the people of Penang," twists painfully in his heart, like the Malayan *keris* that are among Neil's most treasured possessions (277)—an evidently symbolic simile.

In Owuor's *Dust*, Nyipir remembers how he would justify his own transgressions against the Biblical commandment "*Thou shalt not kill*" while acting as a member of the "irregular" postcolonial forces in concluding: "It was simpler to obey commands for the good of the nation" with "no questions asked" (124). He knows that in (what he calls) the "slithering civil war" (272) of Kenyatta's early post-colonial Kenya, "ten thousand able-bodied citizens died in secret," but although "Nyipir knew" and "saw," he "did not speak" (273)—not knowing that, not being a Kikuyu and not having taken the loyalty blood-oath to the new regime, he would soon be one of the next victims. It is his later friend, Petrus Keah, who is forced to forge Nyipir's death after inflicting grievous torture on him lest he (Petrus), too, be suspected of "disloyalty." But Nyipir, even at his much later re-interment of Bolton's remains, suffers: "Scarred memories of a patriot with a wire around his scrotum that would be pulled at another man's whim, for the sake of the nation" (271). It is left deliberately unclear whether the tortured man, here, was Nyipir himself, or one of his former victims.

Both novels end nevertheless on a note of self-forgiveness—a humble acceptance of self, devoid of self-justification or self-righteousness—as much as forgiveness of others²³ and an acceptance of loss. *The Gift of Rain* concludes with Philip once again surveying the natural surroundings of his family²⁴ home: "The night was so full of stars and the sea so dark, I could not tell where the

²³ Space does not permit the detailing of the ways in which both Philip and Nyipir suffer betrayals by others as well as committing betrayals, but both novelists' recognition of multiple, layered, and intertwined betrayals occurring during the politically and personally fraught circumstances they portray, underlines the combined historically visionary and aesthetic achievements of their texts.

²⁴ Despite Philip's decision to work for the Japanese in Penang having been based on his belief that by doing so, he could protect his family, all three of his siblings as well as his father are killed by the Japanese during their occupation of Penang. The "home" they had shared is left to him, as is his father's business, but (like Nyipir) Philip ends up as a lonely man.

ocean clasped the sky. Endo-san's island looked so peaceful, waiting for me as it had been doing even before the day I was born" as he remembers Endo's first-ever words to him: "*I would like to borrow a boat from you*" (Tan 431). Philip states that he "could not blame" Endo for "coming into [his] life," nor for choosing honourable death and leaving him behind (431). Remembering all the people he had loved, Japanese, English and Chinese, Philip concludes that all of them can like himself be described as "beings capable mainly of love and memory," our "greatest gifts" as people (432). He ends his narrative on a newly serene note, holding on to the jade pin his Chinese grandfather had given him—not a weapon, but a treasured memento, having donated his and Endo's Japanese swords as well as his father's valuable collection of Malayan *keris* [daggers] to the Penang Historical Society. He is now able to name himself Philip Arminius Khoo-Hutton (430), at last able to embrace his previously so troubling ethnically mingled heritage.²⁵

When Nyipir's only surviving child, his daughter, returned to Kenya for her beloved brother's funeral, she had found her father (ceremonially given his full name "Aggrey Nyipir Oganda") grief-stricken, but unbowed: "his old policeman posture still intact. Straight, stiff, steady" like "a slender dark stone statue." She mentions that, "As with so many men of Kenya from his time, his manner is genteel—English colonial stranded in time's paradoxes" (Owuor 18). The image is tragically different when, later, she rejoins him at their home: "Inside the cattle *boma*, Ajany finds and touches a bedraggled being that is the shape and texture of an aged, twisted tree bark." Nyipir's eyes are now "bloodshot," his "bare feet cracked" (286). To the loss of his son has been added his wife Akai's consequent desertion of him and their home (Akai blames Nyipir for their son Odidi's death), to placate the "gods" she had also spirited away and "sacrificed" Nyipir's entire, treasured livestock herd. Their old home is crumbling to dust. Ajany brings words of comfort: that Odidi, the dead son, shot down in an ambush by corrupt police, had not been a criminal but a man of "heroic idealism" who (as a brilliant engineer) "left a legacy of work in water" and a "pregnant" woman he had loved—promising "new life" to come (287). Odidi's death brought a sense of sorrowful enlightenment and the realization of the need to change his life's course to another important character: Petrus Keah, who had been one of the men who tortured Nyipir, but saved his life. Nyipir

²⁵ Khoo is Philip's Chinese maternal grandfather's "surname." The article by Leon and Koh is especially enlightening on this point of Philip's mingled ethnicities.

later charged Petrus with protecting Odidi in Nairobi on his behalf as another surrogate father, but Petrus had arrived just seven minutes too late on the day Odidi was shot, feeling his promised “atonement” to Nyipir “denied” (184). He could at least comfort the dying Odidi, who thought Petrus’s gentle words and touches were those of his father. Petrus, always a hard man, broke into tears at this death and with shame felt he himself, as a police officer, had been nothing but a complicit “*class prefect*” in a “*derelict school where every headmaster is a murderous pickpocket*” (187)—which is how he sees his commanders and rulers.

One of the many touching moments in Owuor’s text occurs when Petrus, attempting to say a burial prayer at Odidi’s grave near the family home, breaks down:

Petrus does not finish. He is whimpering. The sound releases what has been blocked within Nyipir. The weight and curse of holding Kenya up for his children, his fear of Akai’s fears. His questions converge in a howl that twists his body. But before Nyipir can disintegrate, Petrus gathers him up. He holds Nyipir. A trick of light makes Petrus’s tears look like blood, which stains Nyipir’s collar. (312)

Beautifully and movingly, the evocation of this moment indicates the healing balm of shared grief, love and empathy. It includes self-forgiveness and acceptance of responsibility for what brought about huge loss and requires difficult re-adjustments. Thus *Dust*, too, offsets the sense of harm and guilt and sorrow caused and suffered by stained and chastened actors, with awareness that recovery must be attempted. In both cases, there is a broader than personal implication for the postcolonial societies depicted in the novels.

Both Philip and Nyipir name, mourn and honour victims of the terrible systems in which they were complicit and even active, opposing the obliterations of time and of secrecy. They present their moving confessional acknowledgements to small audiences, but Tan’s and Owuor’s novels extend their “listeners” to the large public sphere of readership: a space of accessibility and accountability. A legal scholar, Christopher Kutz, in *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age* (2000), concludes:

. . . the collective project of living ethically may find as great support in what it deplors as in what it prizes. The hidden promise of complicity is the conception of community upon which it draws: a world where individuals shape their lives with others, in love mixed with resentment, and in cooperation mixed with discord. Such a world is no utopia, which suggests that it can be made real. (258-59)

Kutz's words serve to link together my readings of these two challenging novels and complement the broader suggestions offered here as to how postcolonial writing contributes understanding to an ever more complex seeming, moving world. They demonstrate the constructive role of contemporary works of creative fiction in potentially assisting postcolonial societies in their struggle to comprehend the difficulties, as well as in the necessary work of bridging and surmounting the terrible ruptures of our (or their) pasts in psychosocial processes of acknowledgement that interpret those horrors not only as inflicted by foreign incursions, but as partly self-inflicted. The texts movingly depict betrayer protagonists' arduous and painfully slow attainment of self-forgiveness. The affective thrust of both novels is towards the necessary sequence (for postcolonial societies) of admitting the complicities and betrayals of their own colonial pasts before proceeding to the healing of festering hurts and horrors by means of acts and attitudes of atonement and forgiveness creatively converging.

This article has juxtaposed postcolonial theoretical positions with what contemporary creative authors from postcolonial societies are writing. It has done so with the dual purpose of evaluating the pertinence of critical and theoretical analyses to the directions in which creative fiction can be shown to be moving, and of identifying significant new perspectives embodied primarily in the two examples of *The Gift of Rain* and *Dust*. The evaluations articulated in the article function on the basis of close engagement primarily with the core of what is judged to be *creative* in both the theoretical and fictional writing spheres, in the sense of transcending older or alternative concepts or ideas in inspiring ways. Fiction as a highly significant field of imaginative artistry has an advantage in that the very nature of the work is creative and exists in imagining and re-imagining the matters it engages with, yet there are indeed creative and innovative aspects to the guiding role of commentators and

theorists. In postcolonial studies, this article assesses the criticism and theory that accords demonstrably with the changing currents of creative fiction, as the kind most effective and pertinent to the task of studying “postcolonial realities” within the wider ambit of the contemporary world.

A comparative analysis was chosen as the most useful to the intended exploration, in demonstrating that the phenomenon of the compassionate, critical and complex representation of betrayer figures is happening “in parallel” across a number of postcolonial literary cultures, whilst leaving room for each novel’s particular insights and achievements to be expounded. For example, although Tan’s and Owuor’s books both explore the colonial and the ensuing postcolonial situation in the societies respectively portrayed, neither the kind of colonialism nor its after-effects are the same in the two contexts. British imperialists are present in both works, but Tan evokes the Hutton family as indigenized and refusing to join the British, who evacuate Penang when Japanese conquest is imminent, out of loyalty and commitment to “all the people of Penang” (277). The Chinese settlement of and in the island of Penang is not highlighted as “colonial” in nature, and the post-WWII communist protests against British rule are only briefly and prophetically glimpsed in the labour unrest that Philip’s father is faced with before the war. In Owuor’s novel the initial British colonial power over Kenyans is vividly portrayed, and some of the atrocities of their rule depicted, but the text moves on to Kikuyu domination that is technically postcolonial and indigenous, but bears many similarities in its violent cruelties to colonial British control of Kenya.²⁶ There is much in the historical records (of course) that is omitted by both authors, and from the analyses in this article. Tan’s text concentrates on the years (end of 1941 to late 1945) of the Japanese invasion, but mostly omits political changes and challenges occurring before the period (almost fifty years later) of Philip relating his adolescent and young adult life under the influence of the Japanese officer Hayato Endo to a visiting Japanese woman who had also loved Endo. Historical gaps in Owuor’s narrative (mainly but not only Nyipir’s) cover primarily the period between early independence (i.e., when Kenyatta had assumed rule in Kenya in the early sixties) to December 2007—the moment just before the contested elections led to major bloodshed and unrest, soon after

²⁶ As Pheng Cheah cautions us, “the New World Order has generated an entire spectrum of popular and official postcolonial nationalisms and more extensive forms of cultural reassertion . . . [Moreover,] the very givenness of culture also refers to its contamination by economic and political forces” (12).

Odidi (Nyipir's son, a fighter against corruption) is ambushed and shot down by police. Family members' personal histories (along with their close associates') are in both novels the filters through which political and broader social developments are registered, giving precedence to the experiential above the informative dimension in the portrayals. This factor endorses my rejection of the slur that postcolonial authors intend in their writings to appeal primarily to the taste for the exotic or "trauma porn" allegedly prevalent among foreign readers from wealthy societies. In texts like my two examples, the humanly natural (especially the familial) and the private registers of fear, anguish, anger and eventual serenity predominate.

Newer postcolonial fiction is evidently aware of a world beyond national borders not only as a general context, but because the texts examine the humanly relational as much as the political roles of the colonial or imperial foreigners or invaders, taking intelligent and perceptive cognisance of the cultures of these non-native participants in local societies. Authors like Tan, Owuor and others like them portray the horrors and crimes fomented by political conflicts with warlike, violent dimensions in their full ugliness. They refuse to erase or to allow continuing silence about awful events in their countries' respective colonial (and postcolonial) histories,²⁷ particularly in depicting how locals helped foreign perpetrators for a variety of comprehensible (though not condoned) reasons—especially by reasons of coercion or fear, or in perhaps misguided belief that their collaboration would help their families or protect lives. The novels also explore how profound loyalty towards a foreign mentor (as is the case for both Philip and Nyipir) demonstrate the uncontainable impulses of the human heart that often transgress the boundaries of the national or familial. In so doing, these writers break the mould of conventional understanding of the role of postcolonial fiction as answering primarily to the need to write back to the invader culture/s, perceived as merely and entirely alien and wicked, in contrast with local cultures, seen as consisting of passively innocent victims.

²⁷ While it is not possible here to invoke ongoing debates in and around trauma theory, I note Irene Visser's characterization of Judith Herman's argument in *Trauma and Recovery* as insisting that "narrative is a powerful and empowering therapeutic tool, enabling integration of the traumatic experience and aiding healing and recovery" (Visser 274). Stef Craps and others have begun to foreground works of literature by postcolonial authors as centrally important to the broadening understanding of the concept of trauma.

Texts like the two novels addressed in the preceding pages are primarily literary achievements rather than predominantly postcolonial *while being* undoubtedly postcolonial—i.e., existing in a condition beyond the colonial, although containing detailed, brutally honest, but enlightening recapitulations of periods of colonization in the depicted society in creatively innovative as much as politically enlightening ways. In their slow accumulation of vividly “realized” impressions such texts achieve not only chronotopical density, but a complex combination of perspectives that allows readers to sense something more of the bafflingly conflictual duties and commitments of those entrapped by wars or colonialism—or forced to negotiate readjustments of power and political-moral legitimacy as best they can. Both Philip and Nyipir have to contend with what Petrus in Owuor’s novel terms “a memory deluge” of “blood-stained transactions” and “compromises”—sacrifices of “souls” to “slaughter” (Owuor 263). Equally, Philip’s memory of how “anger and sorrow walked with” him and “join[ed] hands with guilt—the three walls of [his] prison” (Tan 320) could apply to Nyipir’s frame of mind, too. Yet, as both writers emphasize, individuals as much as societies have to find ways out of the imprisonment resulting from “an embittered history” (Achebe 220). This cannot happen for the characters unless there is full acknowledgement of each protagonist’s contaminated and shameful past. The word acknowledgement is important in containing within it the component “knowledge”—which implies awareness that is made public or shared in some way. Postcolonial novels like Owuor’s and Tan’s make painful, shameful local pasts public knowledge within a readership potentially world-wide and enduring over time and (again, at least potentially) allowing members of the formerly colonizing *and* the formerly colonized peoples to acquaint themselves with the difficult knowledge the reading encounter discloses, since both these texts disturb comforting and complacent historical and political illusions on all “sides.”

I give the last word(s) to Tan and Owuor, in the parallel between their respective texts’ endings, not in despairing bleakness resulting from history’s wreckage, but in enjoining us to take part in the perpetually required human effort of coming to terms (in full acknowledgement) with ugly pasts, while striving to move beyond them in un-erasing forgiveness. Philip at the end of *The Gift of Rain* testifies:

When I had heard my name—my complete, dear name [Philip Arminius Khoo-Hutton], given to me by both my parents, and by my grandfather . . . I experienced a feeling of integration and fulfilment that had eluded me for all my life The night was so full of stars and the sea so dark, I could not tell where the ocean clasped the sky. Endo-san’s island looked so peaceful, waiting for me as it had been doing even before the day I was born *I would like to borrow a boat from you.* I thought again of the first moment we had met in this world. I could not blame him for coming into my life. And I could not blame him for leaving it, leaving me on my own to face the consequences of my choices and my actions in the war. My grandfather had tried to show me the truth of this (Tan 431)

Close to the end of *Dust*, Nyipir is saying farewell to his only remaining child, his daughter Ajany (an artist) before setting off on a journey to “Burma” with Petrus, his former torturer, now his friend, to attempt to retrieve the remains of his father and brother, who died there during WWII as soldiers in the British army. Ajany tells him: “Akai-Ma’s leaving.” “Yes.” “And Galgalu.” “Yes.” When Ajany looks at “tearstains spreading on their clothes,” she asks: “What endures?” At first there is “silence,” then Nyipir whispers: “Draw a picture for us,” and he adds: “Yes, shade even death in . . . use the colors of the sun and . . . and . . .” As he remembers, he “grunts it out”: “forgiveness.” After a moment of quiet, he concludes: “Create room for trying again. Breathing” (Owuor 361; ellipses in orig.). His words expand Ajany’s chosen term “atonement” (357)—the one remotely adequate way to transcend the pain and guilt behind them.

These novelists’ conclusions point us as scholars to the way postcolonial work can best be done, arduously, but within a perspective of responsibility for past wrongs and in aspiration towards a better future.

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